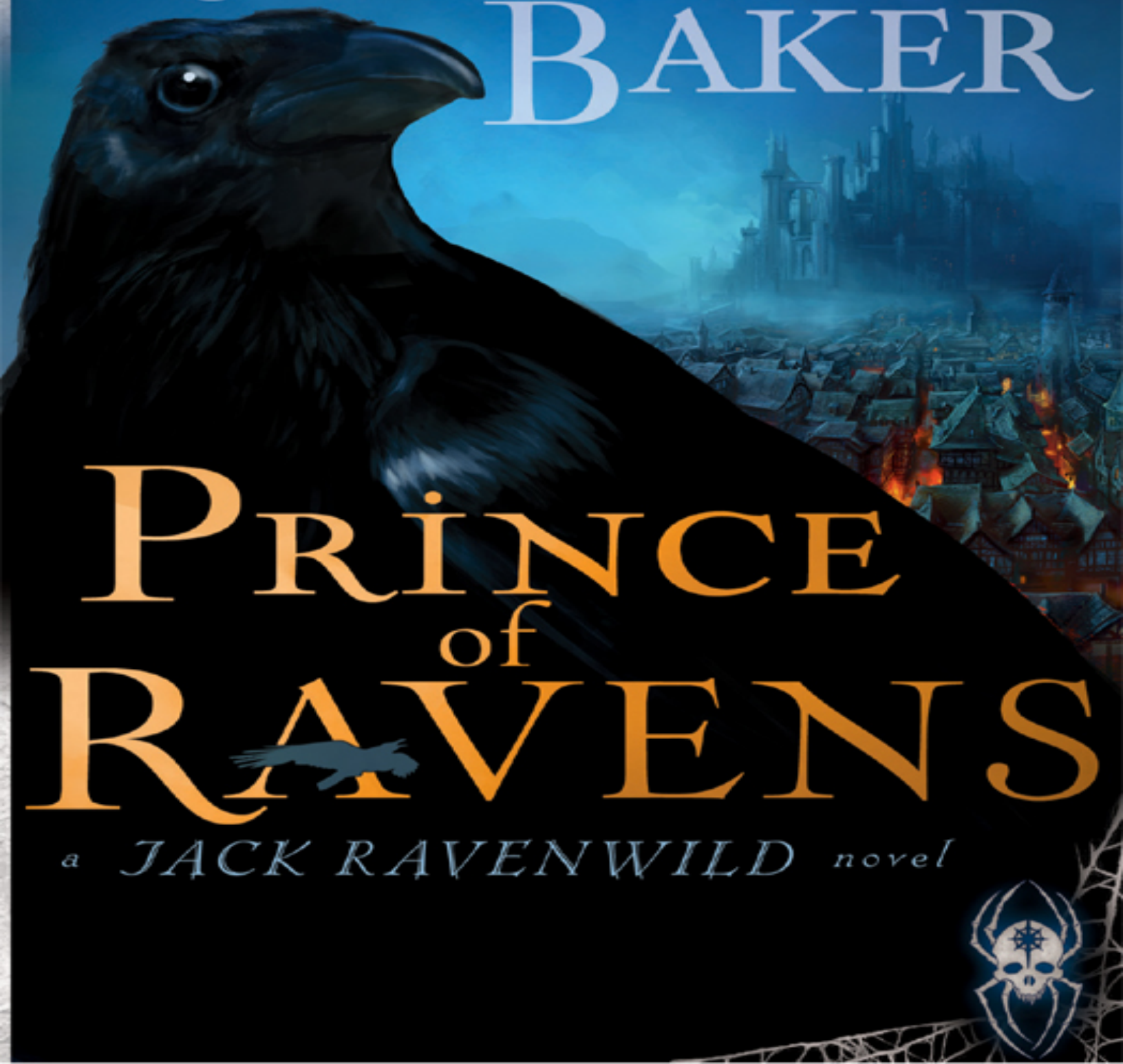
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a JACK RAVENWILD novel



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FORGOTTEN REALMS

RICHARD BAKER

PRINCE of RAVENS

a *JACK RAVENWILD* novel



PRINCE OF RAVENS

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A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE

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CHAPTER ONE

1479, The Year of the Ageless One

Jack awoke with the sensation of falling. He cried out in alarm and flailed his arms in thick, cloying blackness, trying to catch himself as he pitched forward—to no avail. He toppled full-length onto a cold, damp floor, and his breath whooshed out of his lungs.

He sprawled on the ground for a long moment without moving, unable to make sense of the situation. Had he fallen out of his bed? Passed out after imbibing overly potent spirits? The air was chilly and dank, and the cold floor he was lying on was covered in shallow puddles of icy water. That did not seem very much like the floor of his bedchamber or any place he might care to drink himself into a stupor. He could feel smooth, glassy tile and crumbling grout under his fingers. "What in the world?" he groaned. "Where am I?"

Jack opened his eyes, and wondered what was wrong with his vision before he realized that there was little light to see by. Gradually he became aware of an eerie greenish glow illuminating the scene. He was lying on a tile-covered plaza at the foot of a great stone monolith thirty or forty feet high. The tiles in the plaza were arranged in a strange, spiraling mosaic of greens, purples, and blues; the mighty column was made of subtly twisted rock, cut and polished like an enormous gemstone of onyx. Around the plaza hovered several glowing emerald globes, which cast their soft light over a confused clutter of work tables housed in open-sided shelters or pavilions.

"I know this place," Jack murmured. This was the mythal stone of the ancient drow ruins below the dungeons of Sarbreen, which of course sprawled under the streets and squares of Raven's Bluff. Once upon a time ancient dark elf wizards had crafted the monument to anchor spells of surpassing power, only to abandon it thousands of years ago. Magical power still filled the great stone, its

subtle influence seeping out to affect the caverns and surface lands for miles around. But that made no sense at all—the last time Jack had been in this spot, the stone was situated at the bottom of a deep, dark, and excruciatingly cold lake.

He tentatively raised his head to take in more of his surroundings. It seemed that the mythal's plaza was still in the Underdark—the impenetrable darkness overhead and the chilly air strongly suggested a vast subterranean space, but there was no sign of a lake now, other than the puddles on the tile floor. Was this actually the wild mythal or a stone in a different locale that happened to resemble the one he was familiar with?

Gingerly, Jack pushed himself to his feet, shivering in the dank air as he checked himself for injury. He turned a little to one side and discovered that the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan was standing right beside him, sword drawn back to strike and a look of black fury on her face.

He yelped aloud and threw himself back to the ground to avoid her attack. But Jelan did not move. Cautiously Jack peered around his upraised arm, and then realized that Jelan was frozen like a statue in mid-stride. Her fine skin, the long tumbling mane of dark hair, her clothing, her mail, even her sword of fine steel from the distant isle of Wa: All of it was glossy gray stone. Either some unknown sculptor had created the most perfect and lifelike statue Jack had ever seen or she'd been captured in the very last instant he'd seen her, about to be sealed within the wild mythal's mighty stone.

With a deep sigh of relief, he stood up once more, shivering yet again in the chill air. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and battalions of goose bumps were forming ranks on his bare chest and arms. "Silly of me to come down here without warm clothing," he remarked, and then he frowned in puzzlement. He had no recollection of how he'd gotten to the foot of the wild mythal. He remembered a hazy jumble of events in the last few days—a soiree at some noble's manor, casing a merchant warehouse he meant to burgle soon, some sort of trouble with the Knights of the Hawk … but nothing led him to the Underdark or the mythal stone. "Wait a moment," he

continued. “Wait a moment! How in the world did I come to be here?”

“Well, that is unfortunate,” a silken voice purred from the shadows. “We were confused on that point as well, and hoped that you might provide some explanation.”

Jack whirled in surprise and found himself facing a slender dark elf woman of striking beauty. She was a little taller than him (not unusual in and of itself, because he was somewhat short), with smooth ebony skin and flowing white hair arranged beneath a silver tiara. Her diaphanous clothing clung to her soft curves, and she carried a scepter of silver that she tapped against her shapely thigh as she regarded him with lips pursed. Two more dark elves—handsome young men dressed in mage robes of an exotic and somewhat sinister cut—stood by the woman’s side, also studying him. Jack hadn’t seen many drow before, but he guessed at once that the three in front of him were close kin to each other. They all had the same eyes of bright lavender, pointed chins, and wide brows; in fact, the two men seemed to be twins. He’d missed the three of them in his first cursory inspection of his surroundings, because they’d been standing quite still and quiet as they watched him pick himself up from the floor.

“I beg your pardon, dear lady,” Jack stammered. This situation was quickly deteriorating from inconvenient and inexplicable to downright perilous. Drow were well-known for their cruelty and depravity, and he was not at all reassured by their presence. “I am at a loss for words, which—as any who know me can attest—is a rare occasion, indeed. Doubtless some underhanded villain has arranged for me to be embarrassed in this most peculiar fashion, but the dastard responsible or the methods he employed elude me for the moment.”

“For a fellow who claims to be at a loss for words, he certainly has much to say,” one of the robed drow observed. “Is it possible that he does not know what has happened to him?”

“It would not be unusual,” the second of the drow mages answered. “If he has been in stasis for a long time, his memory may have been affected.” The three dark elves exchanged a look. Jack

noticed that there were more drow surrounding the plaza of the mythal stone, stern-faced guards who had their attention firmly fixed on him. In fact, there were quite a number of people—well, orcs and ogres and bugbears and such folk, anyway—engaged in a variety of toils and chores beneath the light of floating green globes all around the plaza of the mythal. He was standing in the middle of a bustling enterprise of some kind, although he noticed that the area immediately around the mythal stone was an island of calm; no one but drow ventured near.

The dark elf woman nodded thoughtfully and returned her attention to Jack. “Let us begin with something easy, then,” she said. “Who are you?”

Jack considered feigning ignorance, since it seemed they expected him to have difficulty remembering things. Unfortunately, he couldn’t guess what advantage he might gain by convincing the drow that he was an idiot. He chose his favorite fable instead. “I am the Landsgrave Jaer Kell Wildhame, of the Vilhon Reach,” he declared. “However, I do not stand overmuch on formalities, and encourage my friends to call me Jack. Might I have the honor of knowing whom I address?”

“I am Dresimil Chûmavh, marquise of Chûmavhraele. These are my brothers, Jezzryd and Jaeren,” the drow noble replied. “Who is the swordswoman? You seemed badly frightened to find her beside you.”

Jack glanced at the imprisoned form of Jelan again—could one call her statuesque in such a condition? he wondered—and cleared his throat. “Frightened? No, merely … alarmed. She is the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan.”

The dark elves did not seem overly impressed. The noblewoman Dresimil glanced at her brothers, who gave small shrugs. “Are we supposed to be familiar with that name?” she asked Jack.

“Myrkyssa Jelan? General of the great horde that attacked Raven’s Bluff a few years ago? Imposter who posed as the Lady Mayor?” Jack detected not the slightest glimmer of recognition in his hosts’ eyes. Perhaps it was not so surprising; dark elves might have no particular interest in events on the surface, he supposed. With a

small gesture of indulgence and a patient smile, he added, “We are not far from the surface city of Raven’s Bluff. Myrkyssa Jelan is, or was, the most capable and dangerous adversary Raven’s Bluff has ever encountered. When her attempt to conquer the city failed, she took a new identity, and seized through subterfuge what force of arms had failed to win. In the guise of Lady Amber Lynn Thoden, she ruled over the city for a year before her duplicity was uncovered.”

“I don’t expect that you would know how *she* came to be in our mythal stone, do you?” the more serious-looking of the two mages —Jezzryd, if Jack had followed the introductions correctly—asked.

“Oh, I put her there,” Jack answered. “She was engaged in using the stone for a spell to break her curse of unmagic and make her a great sorcerer again. My comrades and I successfully foiled her plot.” He held up his hand ruefully, showing his bare fingers. “I have a magic ring of stone command, which now seems to be missing. I employed it to push her into the wild mythal, imprisoning her there.”

Jezzryd scowled fiercely. “You sabotaged our ancient mythal stone by transmuting some surface-world freebooter into its substance, and simply left it like that?”

“In all honesty, I had no idea there were any dark elves about who still laid claim to the stone. It was at the bottom of a lake, after all.” It was possible the dark elves might not regard ignorance of such things as an excuse; Jack decided to deflect the blame. He pointed at the perfect statue of the Warlord and added, “Jelan was the one who chose the mythal for her ritual. If I hadn’t stopped her when I did, there’s no telling what harm might have come to your people’s ancient works. I must say, I’m proud to have played a small part in preserving something of such obvious historical significance.”

Dresimil studied the Warlord’s statue for a moment longer, and then turned back to Jack. “Did you say your lands lie in the Vilhon Reach, Lord Wildhame?”

“Why, yes,” Jack replied. A sudden nasty suspicion crossed his mind, and he added, “Are you perchance familiar with the nobility and domains of the Vilhon?”

Lady Dresimil allowed herself a small smile. “Not particularly. Then again, I doubt that many are in this day.”

A strange turn of phrase, Jack observed. “Well, it is to be expected,” he continued. “The Vilhon Reach is a very long way from here, and of course there are many easily confused baronies, counties, marks, and such things in my homeland. One would have to be an expert in heraldry or exceptionally well-traveled to have heard of the Wildhame demesnes.”

“On the contrary, one would have to be a historian,” remarked the second brother—Jaeren, Jack supposed. The three drow enjoyed a soft laugh; Jack uncomfortably joined in, wondering what the joke was.

“Clearly, he has been in the stone for quite some time,” said Jezzryd. “This would seem to confirm the premise I just advanced.”

“I am afraid I don’t understand,” Jack replied. “What do you mean when you say I’ve been ‘in the stone’? Is it perhaps a drowish idiom that translates poorly into the common tongue?”

The three drow ignored him for a moment, exchanging a few quick, soft words in their native language. It reminded Jack of Elvish, although he couldn’t follow it. Then Dresimil returned her attention to him. “What year do you believe this to be?” she asked.

“The fact that you have asked that question makes me much less certain of the answer than I thought I was,” Jack muttered. “This is, of course, the Year of the Bent Blade, also known as the thirteen hundred and seventy-sixth in the reckoning of the Dales. Or am I somehow mistaken?”

“Significantly so,” Dresimil answered. “You see, this is now the Year of the Ageless One, which I believe is the *fourteen* hundred and seventy-ninth by the surface calendars. I regret to inform you”—and Dresimil’s cruel smile suggested that she did not regret it much at all—“that among the many other things that have occurred since the Year of the Bent Blade, the lands of the Vilhon Reach were largely destroyed by the effects of the Spellplague about nine years after you were imprisoned. It is highly likely that Wildhame, wherever it was, is no more.”

Jack gave a small, nervous laugh. “My lady is armed with a very imaginative sense of humor, I see. Or perhaps there is some discrepancy between the drow calendar and that in common use elsewhere?”

Dresimil raised an eyebrow. “No, I am quite certain that my people and the surface dwellers agree on what year it is. What a fascinating circumstance you must find this. Humans are not a very long-lived race; while imprisoned you have likely outlived everyone you ever knew. Your enemies are dead, and their descendants do not even suspect you exist. Why, think of the delicious acts of vengeance one could exact in such a situation.”

Jack’s knees felt weak, and he reached out to steady himself on the nearby shoulder of the petrified Myrkysa Jelan. If these drow were not playing some convoluted jest on him … could it truly be that a century had passed him by? He glanced again at the stone and the plaza surrounding it. A hundred feet or more of water should have covered the entire site, and yet the lake was nowhere to be seen. “You still have not made clear what you mean when you say that I was in the stone,” he said.

The dark elves shared another laugh at Jack. One of the twins shook his head. “It means that we just removed you from that stone you’re standing beneath, you idiot. Or, to be more precise, the spells we were weaving to repair the mythal undid a spell of encystment we hadn’t perceived. You and your adversary emerged from the stone more or less where you now stand. She appears to have been petrified, but you were not; you fell to the ground, which is how this entire conversation began. Or has that already escaped your faulty memory?”

“Wait a moment,” Jack protested. “You mean to say that someone imprisoned me in the mythal stone, and now a hundred years have passed? But who would do such a thing? Why did no one retrieve me before now? This situation is intolerable! There is much to be set right.”

“I doubt that we will get much more out of Lord Wildhame,” Jezzryd said to his brother and sister. “He cannot explain how he

came to be in the mythal, and whatever he knows is a century out of date in any case. The question now is what to do with him."

"The quarry?" Jaeren mused. "The foreman was begging me for new drudges just this morning. It's hard to keep up his numbers given the nature of the work."

"He seems rather small of stature for rock-breaking," Dresimil said. "Foreman Barzash would not thank you for providing him with unsuitable laborers."

"A porter, then. If goblins can manage an eighty-pound pack, surely he can. In no time at all he'd be just as stooped and bandy-legged as they are."

Jack was still grappling with his astonishment at the entire situation, but he belatedly realized that he had a very definite interest in the outcome of the dark elves' deliberations. It seemed that he needed to change the topic of this conversation at once if he didn't care to be condemned to a lifetime of toil in the Underdark. "Ah, that is all very interesting, but I am not sure that I agree that I am indebted to you for any amount of servitude, physical or otherwise," he said. "I have not caused you any great inconvenience, and you will be relieved to learn that I hold nothing against you for interrupting my restful repose in yon stone. The entire affair is resolved equably; we shall go our separate ways, enriched by a fascinating anecdote. If you could perchance direct me to the elevator-stone that ascends to the dungeons of Sarbreen, I will trouble you no more."

Dresimil laughed aloud. "Well spoken, sir," she said. "However, it is our custom to enslave those who fall into our power, and I am nothing if not an admirer of my people's traditions. More to the point, my house is in great need of unskilled laborers at the moment, and your unexpected appearance here seems a stroke of fortune I shouldn't ignore. We have done you a great service by freeing you from your encystment; surely some recompense is due."

Jack gave a small shrug. "As your brother observed a moment ago, I am not a man of any great strength. In addition, I have something of a delicate constitution. It seems unlikely that I would be very useful as a laborer."

“In that event, you may provide a bit of sport,” Jaeren remarked. “The lower orders enjoy the spectacle of the fighting-pits at the end of a long day’s work. I believe the diggers on the south channel captured a giant solifugid a day or two ago. They’re anxious to see it try to eat somebody, but so far no one has volunteered.”

Jack had no idea what a solifugid might be, but he disliked the suggestion immediately. “Assuming for the moment that I do indeed owe some small compensation for my freedom—a premise I accept only for the sake of argument, mind you—perhaps some other arrangement might be more profitable to both parties? The payment of ransom in exchange for liberty is a time-honored tradition. I will take my leave and return to the surface world to take stock of my fortunes after a hundred years of undisturbed growth, after which I shall at once deliver the necessary payment to House Chûmavh. All that is necessary now is to agree on the sum. What strikes you as fair, my lady?”

“Since the Wildhame lands are no longer in existence, and as far as I understand the last century has been especially tumultuous in commercial affairs, I am afraid I regard your prospects with some pessimism,” Dresimil replied. “No, I think we’ll keep you here to work off your obligation to us, Jack.” She glanced at Jaeren. “Perhaps he might tend the rothé herd? No great strength is needed to shovel dung, and he seems spry enough to avoid being crushed.”

Jack sensed that the negotiations were getting away from him. The dark elves were proving every bit as obstinate as he’d feared. “I can see why you’d think that,” he offered gamely. “But, before I take up management of your herds, perhaps I can make myself more useful to you in another way. I am a man of many rare talents, specialized in the gathering of information, unearthing of secrets, and recovery of lost treasures. And I am quite skilled in the sorcerous arts, to boot. Surely there must be some enemy you wish discomfited or some long-lost valuable you would pay dearly to have back. I am just the fellow for the job. Come, now, there must be some way I can put my considerable talents to work for you.”

“A sorcerer, you say?” Jezzryd asked.

“Indeed!” Jack folded his arms across his chest and gave the drow mage a nod of professional respect. “I am a master of time and space—well, space, anyway, since time has momentarily bested me—and I am quite talented with illusions as well.”

Dresimil raised an eyebrow. “As it so happens, talent in the arcane arts may be of some use to me,” she said. “If you please, would you provide a small demonstration of your skill? Nothing my guards might construe as an attack, of course. They will shoot you down at once if they believe you are threatening me.”

Jack managed a weak smile. “Of course. Hmm … would a spell of invisibility be acceptable?”

The drow noblewoman glanced to her brothers, who gave small shrugs in reply. “Very well. Proceed when you are ready.”

“Excellent! Now, observe carefully. I have been told that my style is quite unorthodox.” Jack breathed a silent sigh of relief, and called to mind his invisibility spell. He’d never studied magic formally, instead learning his spells through experimentation and natural inclination. Once he’d been told that his talents were born of the wild mythal that lay beneath the city he called home. In fact, the last time he’d been in the presence of the mythal stone, he’d been able to feel it seething with magical energy. Strangely enough, it was quiescent now … but then Jack reminded himself that on the occasion of his previous visit to this place, his enemy Myrkyssa Jelan had been engaged in manipulating the wild mythal to rouse its magic for her purposes. Quiescence was probably its normal condition.

With serene confidence, Jack moved his hands in soft, sweeping passes, as if drawing a cloak over himself, mumbling a few words of nonsense under his breath. The trick of it was of course in the mind, in marrying the sheer desire to vanish from sight with a few careful plucks of the will at the intangible Weave of magic slumbering in his surroundings. To his surprise he found that the unseen currents of magical power were quite distant in this place; he could not really sense them at all. Usually the Weave’s warp and woof were warm and alive, an unseen web of living energy that rippled and thrummed to a mage’s gentle plucking. But Jack was not well

versed in the theory of arcane matters, working more by feel and intuition than anything else. He set aside his concerns and focused on the familiar action of working the spell. “Do not be alarmed, Lady Dresimil!” he called out. “I have not teleported myself away. I am here still, but by the power of my magic you cannot perceive me. And this of course is but one of the many spells at my command.”

The drow stared in astonishment at the place where Jack stood, seemingly struck speechless with the skill and deftness of his casting. He grinned from ear to ear in his transparent state, realizing that he had defied their expectations. “Here, allow me to demonstrate that I am indeed physically present,” he continued. “Attend! You see this small stone about six or seven feet in front of Jezzryd’s noble toe? I am picking it up in my hand now.” He lifted the pebble between thumb and forefinger, bobbing it up and down to make sure the drow could see it, and then discarded it over his shoulder. For good measure he stuck his fingers in the corners of his mouth and boggled his eyes at the dark elves, indulging himself in a small jest at their expense as long as he was unseen.

The three drow simply continued to stare in his direction in amazement. Finally Jezzryd managed to speak. “By all Nine Hells,” he whispered. “He’s mad. Completely mad.”

“Lesser minds than mine have of course cracked under the strain of arcane study, but I assure you, my sanity is not in question,” Jack replied. He quickly tiptoed over to a nearby table, and, because the dark elves had not yet offered the simple courtesy of refreshment after dragging him forth from whatever magical prison had held him, indulged himself in a stealthy sip of wine from a fine ewer standing there. Then Jack tiptoed back to where he’d been standing before speaking again. “I trust you are satisfied with my skills?” he said.

Dresimil put her hand to her mouth and seemed to stifle a small cough. “Lord Wildhame, you’re still there,” she said.

“Why yes, of course. That was the purpose of the demonstration with the pebble,” Jack answered. “I have not gone anywhere, I am

merely invisible. If you would care to see a spell of teleportation demonstrated, I shall of course be glad to oblige."

"Dear Dark Queen, yes," Jaeren said aloud. "*This* I have to see."

Jack gestured and released his spell, offering a gracious bow as he returned to visibility. He glanced around, and his eye fell on a workbench across the small plaza. "There," he said. "I shall teleport myself to that small table. Please instruct your guards not to panic."

"Of course," Dresimil replied. "Continue when you are ready."

With another small nod, Jack fixed his eye on the spot he wished to be. He considered simply teleporting himself as far from this place as he could, and taking his chances in the Underdark. Unfortunately, he was unarmed and completely unequipped for finding his way around in the darkness. If he fell into the dark elves' hands again after an attempted escape, he had no doubt that he'd soon encounter the limits of their reasonableness, such as it was. No, better to convince the beautiful Lady Dresimil of his usefulness, then plot an escape later when he was better prepared. He reached again for the subtle energies of the Weave, whispering the words of his dimension-sliding enchantment. Once again the familiar energies of magic seemed strangely elusive, almost as if he were working through some sort of metaphysical fog. He pressed on anyway, redoubling his efforts.

"Now I am here," he announced between the words of his casting. "And an instant later, I am—here!"

Nothing happened. Jack stood before the three dark elves, dumbfounded. He'd never botched a spell in that manner before, not one he knew so well. He offered an embarrassed grin, and quickly repeated the spell, only to fail again. He remained exactly where he was, an arm's reach from the frozen form of Myrkyssa Jelan.

The dark elves shared predatory grins. "Perhaps you should give a little pirouette and announce that you are immaterial?" Jaeren asked. "Or you might make a whooshing sound as your proceed to your destination?"

"I was rather expecting him to run across the square and make a show of 'appearing' by the table," Jezzryd remarked. "Standing

there stupidly is much less entertaining."

"We're still waiting for you to magic yourself to your destination, Jack," Dresimil said. "I must tell you, I shall be very disappointed if you have exaggerated your arcane talents."

With a terrible sinking despair, Jack realized that not only had his teleportation failed—so, too, had his spell of invisibility. No wonder the drow had seemed so astonished. He'd been acting like an idiot, capering about under the mistaken belief that he was unseen. "I—I am certain that I will recall the proper forms of my spellcasting soon," he stammered. "It must be some lingering effect of my encystment in the mythal stone. You will see, I am a very useful fellow—"

The three dark elves laughed aloud. "Pray, no more for now, Lord Wildhame," Dresimil finally said. "So far you have been an amusing guest, but I must warn you against becoming tiresome. Should you recover your arcane powers—" the three dark elves shared another chuckle at that—"then perhaps we will find another way to put your talents to work." She motioned to two of the guards standing nearby. "Varys, Sinafae, take our guest here down to Malmor. Tell him to provide Lord Wildhame with clothing and quarters suitable to his station, and introduce him to his duties."

Jack started to protest, but checked himself. He wasn't sure what Lady Dresimil would do if she decided that he was tiresome, but he suspected that he wouldn't like it in the least. It was clear that his customary charm and talents were not as useful as he would have hoped in this dismal new age, however he had stumbled into it. Time to make the best of a poor hand. He drew himself up with all the dignity he could muster and bowed graciously. "I am at your disposal, my lady," he said.

"Of course you are, my dear Lord Jack," the drow noblewoman replied. She watched with a bemused smile as the dark elf guards came up on either side and marched him away from the plaza.

A thousand questions hovered at the tip of Jack's tongue as he slogged along between the guards, dejected. For the moment he

shut them out of his mind and gazed at the curious scene around him. The exposed lake bed was still quite muddy in many places, and the dark elves' laborers had laid down large planks of a curious gray wood over the worst patches of muck. Slimy walls outlined the shapes of ancient buildings surrounding the mythal stone's plaza. Jack couldn't imagine why anybody had built a city on the bottom of a lake, but then he realized that the lake's level must have varied significantly over time. When he'd been here a hundred years ago (and that was a thought that made his knees go weak), the lake had clearly been much fuller. He didn't remember seeing old buildings on the lake bed then, but perhaps they'd been buried in muck or simply hidden by the murky water. The ancient drow had built their city here when the shore was dry; the lake had flooded at some point afterward and remained that way through Jack's first visit to the site; now the lake had fallen, revealing the old city again. Given the scale of the excavations and the miserable slaves toiling to clear away the muck, Jack decided the drow had drained the lake deliberately. But why would they care about old ruins?

"This all seems like a great deal of trouble," he said to the guards escorting him, waving an arm to indicate the ruins. "If I may ask, what is the point of the work?"

The guards turned on him, eyes narrowed. One stepped forward and drew a long, supple baton from his belt in a single motion, flicking it across Jack's upper arm with whiplike speed before Jack could even register that he was under attack. The sharp *crack* of the baton echoed in the damp air, and Jack buckled in pain. "Slaves do not speak unless spoken to," the guard snarled. "Call any drow you must address master if you wish to keep your tongue in your head. Do you understand?"

"Damn it!" Jack wailed. "Was that necessary?"

The baton flicked again, and this time slashed him across his left knee. Jack crumpled to the ground. The baton was more than simple wood; it had a rasping, almost sticky feel to it, and a fierce burning sting began to rise up in the welt it left behind. "I said, do you understand?" the drow guard shouted.

“Yes,” Jack replied. Seeing the drow’s hand draw back for a third blow, Jack cringed. His arm and leg were afire where the stinging rod had touched him. “Yes, master! Yes, master. I understand!”

“Speak again before we get to the fields and we’ll beat you until you can’t walk,” the second guard said. “And if you can’t keep up with us, you’ll wish we’d killed you instead. Now get up, slave.”

Jack pushed himself to his feet, not daring to say another word. Dresimil and her brothers had struck him as reasonably well-mannered people, not remotely as bloodthirsty and barbaric as drow were reported to be. Granted, they’d taken a certain cruel pleasure in his unusual predicament, but he knew plenty of surface nobles who might have done the same. But now that Dresimil was done with him, he was just a slave … and evidently the drow weren’t in the habit of wasting courtesies on their chattel.

The guards escorting him set off again, and Jack hobbled after them, determined not to provide either with an excuse to strike him again. They passed out of the ruins into a belt of gigantic mushrooms the size of trees, into a forest of pale gray fungi on the floor of the vast cavern. A crew was at work sawing a fallen stalk into the slick gray planks he’d seen in the ruins—naturally, the drow wouldn’t have easy access to the trees of the surface world—but Jack carefully kept his questions to himself. The path led through the fungal grove to the gates of a great dark castle, which loomed over the cavern floor. Weird globes and twisting streamers of eldritch light danced along the ramparts and spires of the structure, which seemed to have been carved from a ring of enormous stalagmites. Here, before the gates of the castle, the guards turned onto a path leading to a stone-fenced paddock lying beneath the castle ramparts. Jack became aware of a heavy animal stink in the air, a charming combination of dank fur, dung, and crushed fungus.

They halted before a crude bunkhouse or shelter of stone, mud, and moss. “Malmor!” the guard who’d struck Jack called. “We’ve got a new dung-shoveler for you, Malmor.”

There was a thick, snuffling grunt, and then a huge, shaggy figure appeared in the shelter’s doorway. Its yellowed skin was covered in

lank, reddish hair, and a vast belly sagged over its ill-fitting leather breaches. The creature—a bugbear, Jack thought, although he'd never seen one so fat—bobbed his head and grinned crookedly at the drow guards. "Good, good, masters. I have much work, much work. But I do not like the looks of this one, no, no. Too small, too small, too thin, I think. He seems a shirker to me, a shirker he seems."

"That is hardly our concern now," the second drow guard said.

The bugbear Malmor approached and poked Jack with one fat finger. "I will have to keep an eye on him all the time, all the time. Easier to kill him now."

"If Matron Dresimil wanted him dead, she would have killed him herself," the guard Varys replied. "If you have dung in need of shoveling, have him do it. Otherwise, work him as you see fit, but do not kill him."

The bugbear flicked a spiteful look at Jack, but bowed and simpered to the dark elves. "Dung I have in plenty, masters, in plenty. It shall be as you say."

"Good," the dark elves said. They threw Jack to the ground at the bugbear's feet, and marched away back to the castle.

Jack picked himself up and started to brush himself off, only to discover that he'd already encountered his first rothé patty. He grimaced in disgust, but Malmor only laughed. "Don't trouble yourself, no, no," the bugbear said. "By the end of the day you'll wear it from head to toe no matter what you do. Now follow me if you want a shovel."

Jack sighed, and followed the bugbear.

CHAPTER TWO

How long Jack remained in the rothé paddocks he couldn't begin to guess. In the sunless gloom of the Underdark, there was no dawn to mark the start of a day or sunset to end one. Time simply passed in dull, shapeless hours of toil. Malmor worked him to exhaustion; he would collapse in some stinking corner of the mushroom-cluttered fields, sleeping fitfully until discovered and kicked awake. At long intervals, surely a full day of the surface world, other slaves were sent to the kitchens beneath the brooding drow tower to bring back pails of bland gray porridge to the paddocks. And then it was back to the never-ending work of tending the dark elves' herds.

Jack soon learned to loathe the rothé, the dark elves' cattle. They were shaggy, stinking subterranean musk-oxen that devoured huge amounts of fungi Jack never would have imagined to be edible by anything, and soon enough turned that fungi into equally huge amounts of foul droppings. The creatures were not as large as surface cattle, standing little higher than Jack's breastbone, but they were solidly built; well-armed with sharp horns; and very, very strong. Worse yet, they were far less stupid than they appeared, and possessed an aggressive, sullen temperament. The first time his meager meal of porridge was brought to him in the fields, two of the creatures ran him off from his pail while a third, clearly the ringleader, knocked it over and lapped up Jack's lunch.

Naturally, he bent his every effort to absenting himself from the situation as quickly as possible. Unfortunately the drow and their trustees were well aware that he might not voluntarily remain in their service, and supervised him with maddening thoroughness. Whenever Malmor wasn't in sight, one of the lesser overseers working for him kept an eye on Jack: Two-Tusks the orc, a rabid gnoll called Karshk, the hateful dwarf Craven, or one of the other boss-slaves who watched over the captives working in the paddocks. Jack discovered that Malmor and his thugs had an uncanny gift for

anticipating him; whenever slaves were sent to work in distant enclosures of the rothé paddocks where a captive might be tempted to make a run for it, the overseers never failed to pull Jack out of the work party for duties close at hand. When field-slaves were sent to the castle to draw pails of porridge, Jack always seemed to be the last one to learn that food was available and consequently drew the meagerest portion. Soon enough Jack's limbs trembled from weakness, and the aromas of dripping roasts and potato-filled stews came to haunt his dreams.

Jack had always imagined that a long period of forced servitude might offer a clever-witted and resolute fellow such as himself the opportunity to rise to his circumstances. His enemies might believe they had broken him, but still the fires of vengeance would smolder in his heart. In the most wretched of circumstances he would naturally find the keys to his eventual freedom: discarded tools that could be cunningly hoarded to improvise weapons or disguises, the slow establishment of camaraderie and trust with fellow-prisoners who could help him on his way, the inevitable appearance of patterns in the guards' activities that he could exploit in a cunning plan. In the bards' stories such things always came to wronged prisoners who persevered in their toil … but not to Jack. He was beaten severely whenever he touched anything that wasn't a shovel. His fellow-prisoners (a motley assortment of orcs, wretched human or dwarf slaves, goblin rabble, and worse) hated him and clearly intended to murder him as soon as Malmor and the other overseers weren't watching. And hunger and toil soon dulled his wits into something about as useful as the miserable gray slop he had to fight for at each meal.

Magic, of course, would have helped him to escape easily. But the Weave remained dull and distant, so much so that Jack began to fear that it was somehow completely absent in the dark elves' domain, or that his long imprisonment had completely numbed his ability to perceive it. Whenever the overseers weren't watching (which wasn't often) he tried every spell he knew, with the same result—he waved his hands, he babbled some nonsense, and nothing

happened. And, naturally, if any overseer caught him skulking off to do nothing, a beating followed immediately.

In the rare moments when Jack discovered enough energy to take note of his situation, all he could manage was a sort of confused indignation. Someone was the author of his misfortunes, but he had no idea who, because he couldn't remember a thing about how he'd come to be entombed in the mythal stone. "A man can be measured by the quality of his enemies," he told himself, "and clearly I had many formidable adversaries." He knew, for example, that the ever-prying, ever-suspicious Knights of the Hawk blamed him for a number of thefts and escapades in the noble quarters of Raven's Bluff. Jack didn't see why they should trouble themselves about such things when he went to great lengths to spread his depredations around a large number of wealthy folk, none of whom were greatly injured by any one burglary on his part; his attentions were certainly no more onerous than ordinary taxation, and they didn't set the Knights of the Hawk on tax collectors, did they? That, of course, suggested the possibility that one of the city's thief guilds had arranged for his abduction to remove him as a rival, but that, too, seemed unlikely. Guilds were highly imaginative in their methods for dealing with freelancers such as Jack, but entombing him in a magical rock a mile below the surface seemed overly … subtle.

"Subtlety is the hallmark of a wizard," Jack mused aloud when next he resumed his deliberations. The fact that he was magically encysted rather than simply bricked up in an alcove was clearly a sign of arcane talent. Therefore, it seemed likely that his unknown adversary was a wizard of some sort. Three potential culprits sprang immediately to mind: Zandria, the Red Wizard who had often threatened Jack for meddling in her affairs; the mysterious Yu Wei, the wizened old Shou who served the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan; and the dreadful necromancer, Iphegor the Black, who so far as Jack knew consented to serve no one. If Jack were to be honest with himself, all three had good reason to act against him. Jack had been the principal actor in the defeat of Myrkyssa Jelan's plot to infiltrate Raven's Bluff, frustrating the master plan of Yu Wei's

liege-lady. He'd raced Zandria to the prize of the Guilder's Vault in ancient Sarbreen, capturing the most valuable treasures before she recovered them. And it was unfortunately true that Jack might have had some small part to play in the untimely death of Iphegor's dearly beloved familiar, which had taken the form of a rather small and frail mouse. The necromancer's failure to provide himself with a sturdier companion was hardly Jack's fault, but Iphegor might have seen things otherwise.

Zandria, Yu Wei, or Iphegor? Or the Knights of the Hawk? Or some hitherto unknown enemy? Someone was responsible for the fact that Jack now stood knee-deep in rothé dung, driven to exhaustion by vicious dark elves and their even more vicious slave overseers as he slowly starved to death, and the more he thought it over, the more the sheer injustice of the thing angered him.

The worst part of it was that his antagonist had likely been dead for decades. Even if he somehow managed to escape from his current thralldom, he could do little to set the matter straight other than perhaps dumping a bucket of rothé dung on the grave of his deceased enemy—a purely symbolic act, and not at all as satisfying a redressal as he might hope for. "It's said that living well is the best revenge," he finally resolved. "Fair enough; the course of my retribution is clear." The sooner he could leave the fields of Chûmavhraele behind him and enjoy life in some civilized place again, the better.

With a sigh, he picked up his shovel and attacked another pile of rothé dung.

One day (Jack had discovered that there was, in fact, a "day" of sorts in the dark elves' fields and mines, marking mealtimes and rest periods) the tedium of his routine was broken by a commotion in the stockyard close under the battlements of Tower Chûmavhraele. Jack was engaged in filling a cart with dung for transport back to the fields where the mushrooms that served as rothé fodder were grown when a gang of hobgoblins marched out of the great fungal forest, driving before them a score of human

men and women. Most of the other field-slaves paused in their work to stare at the procession; Jack decided that it was safe to follow their lead and indulge his curiosity, so he lowered his shovel to watch.

"What is this?" he whispered to the slave working alongside him, a stoop-shouldered dwarf named Hargath, who had so far ignored him—a better treatment than Jack received from many who worked under Malmor's supervision.

"New captives," Hargath replied. "The slavers catch 'em up top and bring 'em down here to sell to the dark elves."

The prisoners were a sorry sight, indeed. Some were injured, limping along or nursing bloody gashes and ugly bruises. Most were in their smallclothes, although a few had managed to keep a torn shirt or a ragged pair of breeches around their waists through the long march down from the surface. They bore their misfortune in a variety of manners, some stoic, some weeping and pleading, a few glaring about in anger. Jack's eye was drawn by one fine-looking young woman with short-cropped hair of midnight black and a proud, defiant set to her shoulders. Her brocade dress suggested that she came of a well-to-do family, or at least had before falling into the slavers' hands. She and her fellow prisoners were all bound with iron manacles, which in turn were fixed in staggered pairs to a great chain that all the captives together had to carry. The hobgoblins—no, actually, some of the slavers were human, Jack noted—jeered and cursed at their prisoners as they rearranged them into ragged lines to best display them for sale.

"What will become of them?" he asked the dwarf.

"Who cares?" Hargath muttered. "Some for the fields, some for the tower kitchens, most to the mines and tunnels, I guess."

A small party of drow emerged from the castle and came out to meet the slavers. Jack recognized a few of the guards he'd seen patrolling the edges of the paddocks and fields, including Varys, the one who'd beat him for speaking on the day he first arrived. A priestess in the black and silver garb of the demon-queen Lolth led them. The priestess eyed the captives with a grudging nod, and then turned to one of the human slavers. "These seem better bred than

the wretches you typically pawn off on us, Fetterfist," she said. "I am impressed; they might actually last a tenday or two before keeling over."

"My wares are largely a matter of chance, my lady, but sometimes opportunities arise," the human slaver replied. He was a tall, bony man with a lantern jaw and long yellow hair that escaped from beneath a curious leather cowl obscuring the upper half of his face. "On most occasions I ply my trade in cheap winehouses and squalid slums, but yesterday I fell on a careless merchant caravan a few miles outside of town. There are no consumptive doxies or shiftless drunkards here; these are strong, healthy drivers and porters." He paused and cleared his throat. "Of course, my expenses were higher than normal, and I must charge accordingly for these."

"Your expenses are hardly my concern," the drow priestess observed. She poked at the shoulder of a sturdy young man who stared down at the ground.

"Ah, well. If you will not make an accommodation for goods of exceptional quality, I suppose I'll return to my customary methods," Fetterfist the slaver replied. "There's no point in paying for a large crew to bring you quality goods if I can't make up the difference in costs at the time of the sale. I'll be back in a few days with a lot of the typical quality, which I'll be happy to sell you at the customary price." He motioned to his men, who began to push and shove the captives back into marching order.

"Wait a moment," the priestess objected. "Where do you think you're taking these?"

"Back to the surface, of course. I know a pirate of the Inner Sea who would be happy to take them off my hands."

Jack smiled at the slaver's skillful shrug of resignation. The fellow knew a thing or two about bargaining, it seemed, which likely came in handy in his sinister vocation. He very much doubted that Fetterfist had any pirate acquaintance waiting to buy whatever the dark elves wouldn't take, but the priestess had no way to know that. The suggestion brought a sour glare to her ebony countenance.

"I think not, Fetterfist," she snapped. "The captives stay here. If you don't care for that, you and your men can join them."

The tall slaver smiled beneath his cowl. “Then who will bring new stock to your doorstep next month, or the month after?”

The dark elf scowled, but she, of course, had no answer to the slaver’s point. Instead she ignored Fetterfist for a moment, and continued her scrutiny of the wretched captives he’d brought her. “I see twenty-three here,” she observed. “That makes one hundred and fifteen pieces of gold at the normal price.”

“I couldn’t possibly sell these for less than eight pieces of gold each, my lady,” the slaver replied with such earnestness that Jack almost believed the fellow. He reached out and seized the pretty dark-haired girl by her bare arm, dragging her out of line. “And this one is quite special, indeed. I have here Seila, the daughter of Lord Norwood; I am sure that your marquise would find her a useful prize indeed.”

“Norwood’s daughter?” the priestess said. Her eyebrow rose, and she turned to study the dark-haired young woman, who squared her shoulders and glared back defiantly. “That might be worth something.”

“She is yours for five hundred gold crowns,” Fetterfist said.

The priestess snorted. “Ridiculous! I know very well that you would not dare to sell her anywhere in the surface world, slaver. Her father’s agents would pursue her, and you, to the ends of Faerûn. However … the marquise may find her plight amusing. I might pay fifty gold crowns for her, I suppose.”

Jack nodded to himself. The Norwoods had been around during his days in Raven’s Bluff; he wasn’t surprised that the family had continued to flourish during the intervening century. If the girl was a Norwood, then she came of a well-to-do family, indeed; she must have an army of retainers and hired swords searching all over the Vast for her.

“My lady, you wound me, you truly do,” Fetterfist protested. At that point the slaver and the priestess fell to dickering over the price, arguing back and forth, but Jack noticed that Hargath had suddenly lowered his head and started to shovel again. With one more glance for the dark-haired girl in the fine dress, Jack followed suit, throwing heaping shovelfuls into the stinking cart.

“What’s this? Shirking again?” Malmor roared from behind Jack. The fat bugbear was remarkably light of step when he put his mind to it, and Jack couldn’t count the times the overseer had managed to sneak up on him. Naturally, Malmor had come upon the scene in the moment after Hargath had resumed work and before Jack had done the same. The bugbear snatched one of the slave-beating sticks —actually a specially preserved tentacle from a grell, Jack had learned—and gave Jack a terrific smack across the shoulders. The blow would have been bad enough, but the tiny stingers in the treated tentacle added a blaze of fiery agony to the overseer’s switching. The unfortunate rogue cried out and folded to the ground in pain, overcome by Malmor’s savage blow.

“You work, you eat,” Malmor snarled. “Work not, eat not, no, no. If you hope to eat tomorrow, you had better not let me catch you shirking again.” The bugbear kicked dung into Jack’s face while Jack was groveling on the ground, and then he strutted away, evidently satisfied that he’d put Jack in his place once again.

“If you won’t be eating at the end of the shift, could I have your portion?” Hargath asked.

“But of course,” Jack mumbled in reply. “I am nothing if not generous toward my friends. Although I would like to point out that next time you notice Malmor approaching, you might offer a small cough or low whistle to put me on my guard.” He slowly climbed back to his feet and looked back toward the new slaves. It seemed that Fetterfist had concluded his dealings with the priestess; the slaver gang was busy turning their captives over to the dark elves. The dark-haired girl was looking right at Jack, wincing; he realized that the commotion Malmor had caused by beating him must have attracted her attention.

“Well, that’s one way to catch the eye of a pretty girl,” he reflected. With as much grace as he could muster given the splattering of rothé dung he wore and the agonizing burning in his back, he gave her a rueful smile and a small bow before picking up his shovel and returning to work. The drow quickly sorted through their new slaves, breaking them up into several different groups. One group was marched back down the road through the

mushroom-forest toward the lakeshore excavations, and another toward the mines and tunnels. The girl and a few others were led to the tower that overlooked the fields and shore, while the remainder was assigned to the rothé paddocks to work under Malmor. The bugbear welcomed his new drudges with blistering oaths and frequent clouts to heads and shoulders.

Jack watched the dark-haired girl vanish into the shadows beneath the castle's walls. He liked to think he'd made an impression on her. With his back and shoulders burning from the grell-stings, he returned to his work.



With the arrival of new captives, Jack was surprised to discover that conditions in the fields improved somewhat. His days were still full of dull, filthy toil, but the presence of fresh workers in the paddocks meant that there were more hands sharing the labor. The bullies and malcontents among the old slaves turned their attentions to the task of putting the new slaves in their proper place in the paddocks' pecking order. More important, Malmor had more workers to keep track of than before, and his eye was not fixed constantly on one prisoner. Jack found more opportunities to carefully survey the bounds of his world, taking note of the obstacles surrounding the paddocks and the frequent patrols that deterred any would-be runaways. He spoke with the newcomers about the route they'd taken down from the surface and what they'd seen in their march through House Chûmavh's territories. He even found more time to quietly experiment with his spells, trying to determine what exactly was wrong with his magic. He was reluctantly coming to the conclusion that he would have to make his escape with his native stealth and guile, but he'd be much more likely to reach the surface alive if he could take on the shape of a dark elf or simply turn invisible and walk off. Unfortunately his spells still eluded him; the magical Weave was dull and dark, and the unseen strands of magic that should have responded to his words and gestures refused to answer him.

A few days after the arrival of Fetterfist's slaves, Jack was roused early to go up to the tower kitchens to draw breakfast for the field-workers. At first he bitterly resented the loss of a half-hour's additional rest, but he realized that the chore at least offered him the chance to see a part of his surroundings he hadn't yet—and perhaps catch a rare and precious glimpse of a female with fewer than four legs. With three other field slaves, he pushed the oxcart-like trolley with its empty tin pails over a road that circled beneath the battlements of Tower Chûmavhraele. Strange, soft-glowing globes of purple and green magelight drifted along the crenellations or hovered above the dark gates, casting an eerie eldritch light over the castle's spires. Orc, bugbear, and the occasional ogre or minotaur slave warriors stood their posts vigilantly, supervised by drow sergeants and officers. None took any special notice of the field-slaves and their creaking cart as they followed the path to a small side-gate leading in to the kitchens.

The kitchens were huge, a vast maze occupied by scores of cooks, dishwashers, and scullery servants. The field-slaves' porridge bubbled thickly in a large cauldron by the door, under the supervision of a middle-aged half-orc woman who carried an overseer's stinging-rod at her broad waistband. Jack and his fellows brought in the pails, filled them, and loaded them back on the cart. "Hurry up, you stupid clods," the overseer bellowed. "Now my kitchen stinks of rothé crap. I should flog the lot of you!"

Jack decided on the spot that he had no more use for the chore of fetching porridge, but then he caught sight of the dark-haired Seila Norwood. She was toiling as a laundress, stirring sheets and spreads in a huge vat of steaming water. The girl happened to look up as he walked past, arms full of tin pails, and their eyes met for an instant before she turned away to tend another vat. Jack could see the exhaustion and despair in her eyes, but there was something else there, too, a small spark of defiance that hadn't quite faded; he hoped that his own eyes still held that spark, too.

From that day forward, Jack made it his mission to be chosen for meal-fetching as often as possible. The trick, of course, was that one couldn't very well ask to do it or else Malmor out of pure spite

would simply say no. The bugbear assumed that if anyone *wanted* one job over another it was because they'd found a way to shirk or malinger. Jack tried to arrange his dung-shoveling and slop-hauling in such a way that he'd be in easy sight of the push-cart they took up to the castle kitchens when mealtime drew near, and that was partially successful; the bugbear and the other overseers were in the habit of ordering the first person they caught sight of to do whatever needed doing next. But after a day or two Jack realized the real trick was to act as if he *didn't* want to push the heavy cart up to the castle, after which Malmor naturally picked him first at every opportunity. Sometimes it worked, and he saw the girl; sometimes it didn't, and he missed her in the kitchens.

A couple of tendays after he'd seen her in the castle kitchens, Jack finally found a chance to speak to the captive noblewoman. The rothé were brought in from the paddocks for shearing, because the drow made a thick, oily wool from their shaggy coats—nothing a dark elf would wear personally, but useful enough in the sort of places where surface folk might use canvas or heavy burlap. It was a difficult and dangerous job. The rothé didn't care to be sheared and were only too happy to gore anybody associated with the task, but in time it was done, and the dirty rothé clippings were gathered in huge bales and brought up to vats set up outside the castle kitchens to be boiled clean.

Jack naturally carried his first armful of the stuff to the cauldron where the dark-haired girl worked. As he helped her get the shearings into the hot water, he said in a low voice, "A pleasure to meet you, finally, even if the circumstances are regrettable."

"I remember you," she whispered in reply, careful not to look at him directly or to interrupt her work. "You were the one that bugbear beat the day we arrived."

Jack nodded. "It's a habit of his, which I am trying to discourage. You are Seila Norwood, are you not?"

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"I heard what Fetterfist said when he sold you to the dark elves." He went to fetch another armful of shearings, and brought them back to her cauldron.

“How long have you been here?” she asked when she spoke again.

“I came here perhaps a tenday before you arrived.”

“Then I am sorry for you. This place is horrible, and the drow … I never imagined such cruelty existed. They are monsters, each and every one of them.” She fell silent as one of the kitchen overseers moved by, stirring the greasy wool with a heavy paddle until the overseer moved away. “I should have made Fetterfist cut me down rather than throwing down my dagger. Death would surely have been better than this miserable existence.”

Jack shook his head in disagreement. “You must not give in to despair, dear lady. Where there’s life, there’s hope.”

“Hope? What hope? I see little cause for hope.”

“Sooner or later the dark elves’ vigilance must wane,” Jack pointed out. He went for another armful of wool, careful to look like he was working hard enough to avoid a beating but not so hard to make an overseer wonder why he was doing more than he had to. When he returned to the girl’s cauldron, he resumed where he’d left off. “They may be clever and cruel, but surely there is some opportunity for escape they have overlooked. Needless to say, finding it will be quite impossible if you end your life.”

Seila Norwood laughed bitterly. “Escape? Believe me, I’ve tried. Even if we got away from the Tower and the fields, we’d be lost in the Underdark, with miles of monster-filled tunnels between us and home.”

“Oh, that,” Jack answered. He gave a small shrug. “That part concerns me not at all. I know the way back to the surface.”

“You do?” She straightened and looked more closely at him.

“I do. There is a levitating stone platform not very far from here that can take us up to the lower halls of the old dwarven city of Sarbreen. It is true that Sarbreen is haunted by its share of dangerous monsters, but I am reasonably well acquainted with its halls and passages. I feel confident that I can avoid them and find my way back to Raven’s Bluff.”

“Grelda,” she muttered under her breath. Jack fell silent, just as the half-orc kitchen overseer stomped past, fixing one ill-favored eye on Jack. He hurriedly dropped one more handful of rothé wool

into the cauldron, and went for another load. The heap of shearings was growing smaller all too fast; he didn't want the conversation to end.

When he returned, Seila glanced around carefully and asked, "If you know the way out, why are you still here?"

"The difficulty lies in eluding the guards and overseers in the rothé fields. I doubt that I could reach the transport-platform without being caught, and even if I did, it seems very likely that it would be guarded." Jack shrugged. "This would be much easier with my magic, but it seems to have deserted me."

"Your magic—are you a wizard, then?"

"A wizard, bah! Mummers and fakers, in my opinion. No, I am a sorcerer of some skill among my many other talents … but, as I have just noted, my magic seems peculiarly fickle these days."

The girl frowned, digesting Jack's remarks. Then she gave herself a small shake, and glanced up to meet his eyes. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Jaer Kell Wildhame," Jack answered. "Formerly of the Vilhon Reach, which I understand is no longer in existence, having been destroyed by some untoward event known as the Spellplague. My friends call me Jack."

"The Vilhon Reach?" Seila said. "I don't understand. How is that possible?"

"It is something of a long story. You see—"

He was interrupted by the whistling sound of Malmor's stinging-rod striking flesh and a cry of pain from another field-slave a short distance away. "That's all, maggots!" the bugbear shouted. "No more loafing to be done here. Back to our paddocks, our paddocks. The rothé are waiting, yes, yes."

Seila grimaced. "You must go, Jack," she said under her breath.

"So it seems." He made a show of picking up tufts of wool he'd dropped nearby, delaying the inevitable. "Do not despair, Seila. There must be a way out; sooner or later I will discover it. When I do, I promise you, I will not leave you here. Our chance will come, and both of us will see the sunlight again. I swear it."

"Brave words," she murmured with a small smile.

He paused just long enough to give her a wink, then hurried over to join the other paddock-slaves as they trudged back down to the fields. It was unlike him to make a promise with the full intention of keeping it, but he realized that he meant every word of what he'd said to Seila. The feeling was unsettling, and he paused to examine it more closely. "Well, of course," he told himself. "If I escape alone, I would find myself a penniless vagabond in the city streets. But if I rescued a noblewoman from the drow, who knows what sort of reward I might expect? Why, Seila Norwood might be worth rescuing even if she were a scrawny, plain-faced shrew, which of course she is not." If he knew where the dark elves were keeping a coffer full of precious gemstones, he would certainly try to carry it off when he made his escape. A valuable captive was not much different, when one considered the question carefully.

Under Malmor's eye, the slaves returned to the fields and resumed their normal duties. The rothé were in an especially murderous mood after their shearing, and several of Jack's fellows were gored before the herds settled down again. Despite this, his spirits were high for the rest of the day, as he replayed his conversation with Seila Norwood again and again in his mind. It was about the only pleasant experience he'd had since his removal from the mythal stone.

The next day, Dresimil Chûmavh sent for Jack.

He was engaged in shoveling rothé feed from the back of a wagon into a feed trough when Malmor led a trio of dark elves into the fields. "There, masters," the bugbear simpered. "You see, I have looked after him, after him. The human is well."

Jack didn't feel very well. He was cold, filthy, and exhausted, and he'd lost at least fifteen pounds from his wiry frame in the tendays or months he'd been enslaved. He paused in his shoveling, wondering what new devilry was at work.

"You!" one of the drow soldiers snarled. "Come here!" Jack dropped his shovel and wearily climbed down from the wagon,

presenting himself before the warrior. The fellow looked him over and frowned. “Are you the one called Jack Wildhame?”

“I am,” Jack replied. Seeing a flicker of dissatisfaction in the dark elf’s eyes, he quickly added, “I am, master.”

The dark elves frowned in distaste. “He stinks,” one of the others announced. “We cannot bring him before Lady Dresimil like that.”

“The kitchens,” the first drow decided. “They’ll have a washtub. You come with us, slave.”

The soldiers marched Jack back up to the Tower kitchens. Jack kept his eyes open for Seila, but she was nowhere in sight. On the bright side, the dark elves instructed the kitchen slaves to make ready a washtub, and ordered Jack to clean himself quickly in the hot water. When he’d finished with the worst of the grime and filth, the guards produced clean servant’s clothing matching that worn by the other workers in the castle. For the first time in days and days, Jack felt warm and clean, even if he couldn’t quite get the stink of the rothé off of him. Satisfied that he was as presentable as he was going to get, the drow soldiers took him through the Tower’s echoing stone corridors before leading him out through the stronghold’s main gate. They turned onto the road Jack had been brought down when he first arrived, and set off toward the lakeside ruins at a quick pace. Weakened as he was by his labors, Jack found it hard to keep up.

A half-mile’s walk brought them back to the heart of the dank, muddy ruins and the plaza surrounding the wild mythal. Scores of slaves were hard at work scrubbing and polishing the ancient tiles covering the ground, while more worked to repair the crumbling walls surrounding the square. A dozen thralls—most of them ragged-looking humans who wore silver collars glowing with arcane glyphs—stood in a circle around the stone, chanting words of magic under the direction of drow wizards. Mages enslaved by the dark elves? Jack wondered. He grimaced as he realized that now he knew why Dresimil had need of slaves with arcane talent. If he had retained some of his affinity for magic, he might very well have been one of the exhausted wretches standing around with a silver collar on his neck. What great enterprise are the dark elves engaged

in? Jack wondered. Some mighty effort was underway, but what was it? He was dying to ask his captors the purpose of it all, but he swallowed his curiosity. At best his questions would be ignored; more likely he'd be beaten again for speaking out of turn.

He studied the mythal as his guards escorted him across the plaza, and noted with some surprise that the stone seemed to be taking on a subtle, glossy sheen, almost as if it were growing a little translucent. There was a faint green luminescence hiding deep in the stone pillar, and he realized that he could very dimly perceive a glimmer of magical energy gathering in the mythal's heart—the first hint of magic he'd sensed since waking up in this dismal new age. Jack slowed to look more closely, but a sharp glance from the guards escorting him prompted him to pick up his pace, and he followed more closely as they led him to a pavilion standing at one side of the plaza, overlooking the work. Dresimil and her brothers were there, observing the efforts.

"Lady Dresimil, we have brought the slave you asked for," one of the warriors said. "He was rather rank. We took the liberty of having him wash and put on clean clothing."

Dresimil turned and gave the guards an absent nod. "Very well," she murmured, dismissing them. The warriors withdrew, leaving Jack alone with three noble-born dark elves.

Jack drew himself up, clicked his heels, and bowed. "My lady," he said.

"Charming as ever, I see," Dresimil replied. "Good. I'd feared the work in the fields might prove too much for a man of your delicate constitution."

"It is somewhat more rigorous than I would have hoped, but I do my best," Jack said. He longed to explain just how disagreeable he found the circumstances she'd thrown him into, but bit back on the words. He tried to tell himself that he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how miserable he was, but it was really a question of self-preservation. If he complained too loudly, Dresimil might be stirred to think of some new and even less pleasant use for him. Fortunately the dark elves seemed affable at the moment … perhaps enough so that he could indulge his curiosity.

He put on an air of polite interest and nodded toward the mythal stone. “Your work on the mythal seems to be proceeding well. I can see the progress since my last visit here.”

“As it turns out, we have need of it,” Dresimil replied.

“Need of it?” Jack asked. “But the mythal was abandoned thousands of years ago, was it not?”

Dresimil shrugged. “It was. But that is not what I wished to speak to you about, Jack.”

Jack suppressed a frown of disappointment. He’d hoped that Dresimil might volunteer more than that. Now his curiosity was indeed whetted, but clearly it wouldn’t be wise to pry too deeply. Why did the dark elves need the old mythal? Doubtless they had some plot in mind, perhaps against the surface world, but what was it? “How may I be of service?”

“Tell me more about the woman we found petrified alongside you,” the marquise said. “Myrkyssa Jelan, was that her name?”

“Your recollection is accurate. She styled herself the Warlord of the Vast. In the Year of the Tankard—thirteen seventy—she appeared in the passes of the eastern mountains at the head of a formidable army, and ravaged much of the Vast for the better part of a year before setting siege to Raven’s Bluff. She had the very curious characteristic of being immune to magic.”

“Immune?” Jaeren asked sharply. “How so?”

Jack frowned. “Magic simply … wasn’t for her. No divination could find her, no battle spell could harm her, and in turn she could not touch or wield magic at all. She told me once that it was a generations-old curse upon her family, one that she was anxious to break.”

The drow exchanged silent glances. “Continue,” said Dresimil.

“Of course. Her horde laid siege to Raven’s Bluff. The Ravenaar army marched out to meet her, and defeated her forces in a great battle.” Jack paused, organizing his thoughts. “Jelan escaped the destruction of her army, and for many months afterward the city officials searched far and wide for her. It was assumed that she’d died unmarked in the battle, or retreated back to her strongholds in the wild lands far to the east.

“Unfortunately, neither hope proved well-founded. Myrkyssa Jelan infiltrated Raven’s Bluff in disguise. She posed as the last surviving member of the Thoden family, and rose to become the city’s Lady Mayor after the old lord mayor resigned. No one suspected her, because as the Warlord no one had ever seen her face.” Jack offered a small shrug. “I came to know her in the aptly named Year of Wild Magic, thirteen seventy-two. While she was Lady Mayor, she also masqueraded as a lawless adventurer called Elana. I suppose she found a second identity as a criminal useful for engaging in plots and intrigues that would be unseemly for a civic official. In her guise as Elana, she conspired to seize control of the city. But her ultimate goal was to gain access to this mythal; she believed she could employ its magic to break her family’s curse.”

“Resourceful,” Jaeren observed.

Jack nodded. “I think it would be fair to say that Myrkyssa Jelan was the most ambitious, resourceful, and resolute person I have ever met. She was ruthless, but she also possessed a peculiar sense of personal honor—something she brought with her from her time in the East, I suppose. I was lucky to defeat her.” He hesitated, wondering how far he could push this moment of amiability, before adding, “Why do you ask?”

Dresimil pursed her lips in displeasure. “She escaped this morning.”

“Escaped? But she was a statue.”

“It seems that was not a permanent condition,” Jezzryd answered. “The effect wore off, and she returned to life a few hours ago. Our guards failed to subdue her.”

There was likely a good story in that simple turn of phrase, Jack reflected. How many injuries and how much mayhem were entailed by a failure to subdue Myrkyssa Jelan? “She is a formidable blademaster,” he agreed.

“True enough, but as you just described, no magic could touch her,” said Jezzryd. “The most powerful spells of our mages and priests left her completely unscathed. Yet you say that you entombed her in a magical prison when you defeated her a hundred years ago.”

“I believe I caught her in a rare moment of vulnerability, Lord Jezzryd. When I confronted her here, she was almost finished with the ritual that would restore her ability to wield magic—and to be affected by it, too, I would guess.” Jack rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “It seems that the ritual was not quite completed, or did not have the effects she anticipated. Perhaps her native unmagic simply took some time to reassert itself?”

The drow wizard glanced at his sister and offered a slight shrug as if to say that he saw no reason to doubt Jack’s explanation. Dresimil thought a moment, and then addressed Jack again. “What do you think she will do now that she is free?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t say,” said Jack. “She might seek to try her ritual again, but now that your mythal is no longer deserted, that would seem difficult. I suppose she’ll return to the surface world, discover that she has been entombed for a century, and make the best of the situation. If the people of Raven’s Bluff have forgotten her, they may have just gained a determined new enemy they know nothing about.”

“Did she have a stronghold or base of any kind? Any familiar haunts?”

“She used a ship in the city’s harbor as her headquarters, but that must be long gone by now.” Jack shrugged. “In her guise as Amber Lynn Thoden, she resided at Thoden Manor.”

The dark elves conferred silently again. After a moment, Dresimil made a languid gesture of dismissal. “Thank you, Jack. You may return to your duties in the fields.”

The thought of returning to the rothé fields sparked a sudden rush of panic in Jack. “If you are concerned about Myrkyssa Jelan, I may be able to assist you,” he said quickly. “No scrying-magic you attempt can discover her. If you want her found, you will need to send someone who knows her appearance well enough to see through the disguises she may adopt.”

The noblewoman shrugged. “I doubt that I have much to fear from Myrkyssa Jelan,” she replied. “Our purposes do not intersect; I am content to let her go her way, so long as she stays out of mine. But

if that changes, Jack, then I will know where to find you." She motioned again to the waiting guards.

Jack ground his teeth in frustration, but he didn't dare to press her any more. "I am, quite literally, my lady's servant," he replied with a bow. He nodded to Jezzryd and Jaeren, and allowed the guards to lead him back to the pastures.

CHAPTER THREE

For a day or so after his second interview with Dresimil Chûmavh, Jack managed to remain at least a little clean, warm, and dry. But soon enough the toil in the fields took its toll, and he found himself besmeared by the stinking mushroom fodder and rothé patties again. The situation was completely intolerable; he *had* to escape from the misery of thralldom in the dark elves' realm, or he would lose his mind altogether. There was nothing else for it—if he wanted to take himself out of cruel toil and brutal drudgery (and rescue Seila, too, if it could be managed) he would have to work out some way to use magic.

Huddled under whatever threadbare blanket he could find to cover himself when he slept, he whispered the words to each spell he knew and groped for the dormant strands of magic in his surroundings. Again and again he built the symbols for the dimension-step spell, the spell of disguise, the spell of invisibility, or even the simple spell of moving things at a distance. No matter how carefully he worked, the enchantments failed each and every time. Magic had always come naturally to him, as simple as learning to add two and two or think up a bawdy rhyme, but the same actions and confidence that had always worked for him before simply yielded no result. He was certain that he was performing the spells correctly, and still nothing happened.

The mystery of it distracted him constantly. "It makes no sense," he grumbled as he drove rothé from one paddock to another, instinctively avoiding the vicious brutes' stamping hooves and goring horns. He clearly recalled the exact process by which he worked magic before waking in the gloomy world of the dark elves; he moved his hands like *so*, and said words such as *these*, and shaped his mind around *this* symbol or *that* analogy … but now those familiar actions meant nothing. Either he had lost whatever mystic sinew he once possessed that enabled him to shape magic or the

nature of magic itself had somehow changed. Dresimil had mentioned something called the Spellplague. Could he have caught some sort of arcane contagion while entombed in the mythal?

Unfortunately, Jack could hardly ask his fellow field slaves about the arcane repercussions of the Spellplague. Most were illiterate or belonged to uncouth kindred such as goblin or orc, who could not be expected to know anything of wizardly troubles even if they weren't inclined to beat or murder Jack on general principle. The drow were probably much better informed, but Jack had learned that it was never a wise idea to attract a dark elf's attention for any reason at all. No, if the problem had a solution, he would have to work it out for himself.

In the fields he paused in his work, gathering his full force of will and demanding magic to answer his call, only to sense dimly the elusive energies slipping beyond his grasp. When that didn't work, he tried to frame his spellcasting as a sing-song in his mind, hoping that rhyme or rhythm might spark some unsuspected connection. Other slaves sometimes stared at him or avoided him altogether, but Jack was hardly the only field-slave who talked to himself or gave an appearance of slowly going mad.

Finally, in frustration, he tried emptying his mind of thought and desire, opening himself to any mystic impressions that might come to him … and fell asleep before sensing anything he could grasp for weaving a spell. Work in the rothé pastures was nothing if not fatiguing. He didn't awaken until Malmor found him and roused him with a vicious kick.

"Ah, ha!" the bugbear cried. "Shirking shirker! To the paddocks with you, human rat, the paddocks! The rothé must be fed! Work!" He flung a shovel at Jack and moved off.

Jack climbed groggily to his feet. "Shirk, work," he muttered. "When I regain my magic, you will rue every outrage and indignity you have heaped upon me, Malmor." The bugbear was already out of earshot, which was probably fortunate for Jack. He picked up the shovel at his feet, and stumbled off for another day—or night?—of toil.

Time passed in gray misery, each day blending into the last until Jack no longer knew how long he'd been a prisoner of the drow. Two times he made the weary trudge up to the castle kitchens with the creaking oxcart and failed to catch sight of Seila, but the third time Jack found her tending the cauldron of mushroom-flour porridge that served as the field-slaves' provender. He breathed a small sigh of relief to see that no harm had befallen her. His future fortune likely depended on bringing her back to the Norwoods safe and whole, after all, and he was rather fond of her, too. He hurried over to the cauldron with an armful of pails to fill.

Bedraggled and exhausted as she was, Seila found a small smile for him. "Hello, Jack," she whispered. "Kitchen duty again? Malmor must have it in for you."

"Simply my luck," he replied under his breath. "I do not mind, though. Fetching supper provides me with an excuse to see how you are getting on."

"As well as I can in this awful place, I suppose," she answered. She ladled the thin porridge into the workers' pails as Jack loaded them onto the cart. Her sleeve slipped up her arm as she poured out the gruel; ugly red welts and purple bruises marked her forearms. Jack realized that she was working with unusual care, her body tense and stiff.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"I tried to slip out of the castle," she answered. "The dark elves caught me before I'd gone a hundred yards. They had Grelda beaten for losing sight of me, and then gave me back to her … I fought back, but it only made her angrier. I thought she meant to kill me."

"Brave girl," Jack said with admiration. "I doubt that she would murder you outright, though. The drow see some value in keeping a Norwood captive. They wouldn't be so careless with their property."

Seila grimaced. "Death seems a kinder fate than this."

"There is still hope. Your family must certainly be looking for you."

"If they even know I am alive. Fetterfist and his gang killed or carried off everyone in the caravan. There was no one left to tell the

tale." Seila scowled at the vat of porridge. "If we ever get out of this, I'll have my father put a price on his head that he'll never outrun, not if he flees to the very ends of the world. That … *pig* has much to answer for. And I'll tell you something more: Fetterfist knew exactly where to find my caravan and how strong our escort would be. How did he know those things? Did he know I would be there, too?"

"I'll be delighted to put those questions to the slaver when the time comes," Jack promised. The fact that someone would be looking for Seila was an interesting angle he had not considered before; if he failed to find the opportunity for escape, her family's agents might come to her rescue and provide him with a chance to accompany her to freedom. And of course it was equally interesting that Seila's father had the means to set enormous prices on villains' heads, since in the right circumstances those same funds might also make for a handsome reward, indeed. Once again Jack promised himself to mount an escape at the first opportunity. "For now, be patient, endure as best you can. I will think of something."

"I hope it is sooner—" Seila abruptly stopped herself as Grelda the overseer approached. The porridge-pails were all filled, and despite Jack's brave show of arranging them carefully on the cart for the trip back to the paddocks, it was clear that their work was done.

The half-orc paused to glare at Seila. "There's to be no cavorting with the field-slaves," she snarled. Then she fixed her piggish eye on Jack. "And you, my handsome fellow, can go back to your rothé. Don't let me catch you sniffing around my kitchens again." Her hand dropped to the grip of the stinging-rod at her hip, and Jack quickly retreated. It would be bad enough if the kitchen overseer beat him, but the last thing he wanted to do was give her an excuse to flog Seila on his account. Discretion in this case was the better part of valor.

He caught Seila's eye one last time as he pushed the cart out of the kitchen, and gave her a quick wink before setting out back down the path to the paddocks.

After the encounter with Grelda, Jack decided to avoid the porridge detail for a day or two, for Seila's safety and his own. He went back to the fields, dragging sledges full of the rothé fodder out to each of the paddocks, then shoveling the inevitable product onto other sledges that were then dragged back out to the fields where the fungus was cultivated. Working in the dark elves' pastures was an ironically circular labor, when he reflected on it. He spent no little time wondering why the dark elves didn't just pasture their livestock in the middle of the fungus-crops and save all the back-and-forth. Failing to come up with an answer, he turned his attention back to the puzzle of his failing spells, muttering nonsense and making odd gestures as he worked alongside the rest of the field-slaves.

Finally, a month or so after the wool-shearing, Jack found his break.

He was toiling to reinforce the fieldstone paddock-fence by the castle road with fresh stones, when a team of trolls pulling a heavily laden wagon up the road got their vehicle stuck. The dull-witted creatures broke the wagon's axle trying to work it loose, infuriating the dark elf wizard overseeing them. "Stupid oafs!" the mage shrieked. "I will teach you to be more careful."

With a single swift syllable and a subtle motion of his left hand, the wizard expertly conjured a whip of emerald fire to lash the clumsy trolls … and Jack realized that he could dimly sense the subtle strands of magic that shaped the spell.

As the hulking monsters yammered in pain and fright, Jack quickly ducked back down behind the stone fence. "Something has changed," he murmured. He hadn't been able to sense any sort of magic since he'd awoken from his slumber in the mythal stone, except when he was brought back to the stone's locale to tell Dresimil and her brothers stories of Myrkyssa Jelan. Then he'd felt a faint whisper of something in the mythal stone itself, most likely as a result of the powerful enchantments the dark elves were using to restore the device. Now it seemed that he could glimpse magic at work, even when he was quite a distance from the stone. But why now?

Crouching by the wall as the trolls fled back down the road, pursued by the wrathful dark elf, Jack thought carefully. Then it came to him, a recollection of a conversation long ago. “Yu Wei,” he said aloud. Long ago, Jelan’s Shou wizard had told him that his magic was a manifestation of the wild mythal’s power. Perhaps, as the dark elves repaired their ancient mythal, they unknowingly restored something of Jack’s own knack for magic. After tendays and tendays of captivity, the repairs had proceeded to a point that finally returned him some small capacity to sense magic—and perhaps work it.

Jack glanced about, then repeated the same arcane gestures and words he’d been trying for tendays. It took a half-dozen tries, changing the somatic motions and trying out different mental approaches, but then suddenly he felt the subtle sensation of magical energy rippling and responding to his touch.

Quickly he pressed on with one of the most basic spells he knew, a simple cantrip of minor telekinesis. Magic hummed softly in his mind, answering his call. He crooked his right hand and raised it, and at his gesture a large rothé patty twenty feet away quivered and rose into the air. Jack motioned with growing confidence, and the patty bobbed up and down in his telekinetic grasp before he flung it into the air with one final wave of his hand.

“Now I am getting somewhere,” Jack said to himself. He glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention to him and ducked down to hide among the rothé as he continued his experiments. He attempted another spell—a spell of teleportation, designed to let him step through the dimensions and reappear hundreds of feet away in the blink of an eye. He’d always found that to be a useful talent, especially when it came to evading capture … but this time the subtle energies refused to acknowledge his command. Jack scowled in frustration, repeating the experiment, but still his dimension-step spell eluded him. Perhaps he wasn’t getting along quite as well as he’d thought.

Did the mythal fluctuate in some way? he wondered. If his powers were indeed born in its magic, the manipulations of the drow might conceivably affect his ability to wield magic. Or had he simply met

the limits of his arcane talents in this Weave-less day? At the height of his former confidence and skill, a minor teleportation was about the most difficult spell he could perform. Jack scowled, wondering exactly how many spells remained of the repertoire he assumed to be at his fingertips. Why, he might be no more skillful than a clumsy apprentice, fumbling to strike a small light or levitate a rothé patty a few feet in the air! "An unacceptable outcome to months of trial and error," he muttered blackly.

"Where is that shirking fool of a human?"

Jack looked over the backs of the nearby rothé and spied Malmor striding in his direction, glaring furiously from side to side. The bugbear fumed and swore, but he hadn't quite caught sight of Jack yet. The last thing in the world that Jack wanted was for the fat bugbear to find him avoiding work and playing at magic; he ducked back down again and tried one more familiar spell. This time the magic responded to his words and gestures; just as Malmor swaggered into his paddock, scattering the rothé, Jack completed a spell of invisibility and vanished from sight.

Malmor peered about the enclosure, muttering under his breath, then turned and stomped back in the direction of his filthy hut by the feed bins and silos. There would be several overseers and more trustworthy slaves working there; no doubt the bugbear meant to round up a search party and comb the fields until he found Jack. That was the usual procedure when Jack was trying not to be found. The rogue took the opportunity to quietly slip past the restless rothé and hurry two paddocks over, exulting in his momentary ability to avoid whatever unpleasant task the bugbear had in mind.

Jack was just beginning to consider his next move when he felt his invisibility spell fray and fade. He definitely did not possess the skill he'd enjoyed back in the days before his unfortunate encounter with the mythal stone … but he had at least a little magic, and that would be enough. Jack flickered back into visibility, startling the nearby rothé. He laughed aloud, a laugh that was a little uneven around the edges. A pair of goblins working nearby stopped and stared at him over their shovels as he reappeared, perhaps wondering if his sanity had snapped altogether. "Of course I am

mad!" Jack called to them. "Mad with genius, my malodorous green colleagues! Oh, much will now be set right, you will see!" He gave them a conspiratorial wink before he ran off toward the granaries and stockades closer to the castle.

Hiding between two shearing-sheds, Jack took a moment to work out his spell of disguise. This one was simple enough, and now that he had the knack of it, the subtle strands of magic fairly hummed in his mind's grasp. Threads of illusion shimmered around him as he crafted a new appearance, a bigger, fatter, hairier appearance. A crooked fang protruded over his lip; his ears grew long and pointy; his arms lengthened while his legs shortened, giving him a rolling, bandy-legged posture. In ideal circumstances he would have performed his magic in front of a mirror, correcting minor details as he noticed them, but no such facilities were at hand. In thirty heartbeats he judged he was done, and emerged from his hidden corner with a wide-bellied swagger.

Instantly he found himself confronted by the field overseer Two-Tusks, a bald orc with a severe underbite. The orc grunted in surprise.

"What are you doing, you shirking mongrel, you mongrel shirker?" Jack demanded in his best imitation of Malmor's voice. "I should put you back in the paddocks, the paddocks."

Two-Tusks cringed and stammered, "The human rat is not at his place, Malmor! The goblins told me he ran off this way. They said he went mad. I go to find him."

"He is not here!" Jack growled. "Now you listen: Go to the south gate and open it. Drive all the rothé out of the paddocks. No more rothé in the paddocks, turn them out, turn them out."

Two-Tusks stood and gaped. "But then the rothé will all get out."

"Of course!" Jack bellowed. "Why would I tell you to open the gate if I did not want the rothé to get out? The drow want the beasts to graze free for a time, so Malmor must let them out. Now do what I say at once, at once!"

The orc turned and fled the scene, dashing off toward the south. Jack could hear him shouting orders to other slaves, lashing about with his stinging-rod as he yanked them away from their current

tasks and drove them toward the assignment Jack had given him. Jack grinned to himself, then swaggered off toward the next overseer to catch his eye, the gaunt gnoll Karshk. The unpleasant creature was hurrying across the pasture to put a stop to whatever Two-Tusks was up to. “Karshk!” Jack bellowed, stopping the gnoll in his tracks. “Go at once to the west pasture and drive out all the rothé. Now is the time they are to graze free. Quickly, quickly!”

The gnoll stifled a yip of surprise. “But Malmor-r-r, we’ll never-r-r catch them all once they get fr-r-ee,” Karshk protested.

“They must have exercise, exercise. So the drow command. Who are we to argue with what our dark masters desire? Who are we, who are we?” He raised his hairy hand as if to backhand the gnoll, but Karshk scampered off westward, heading for the next pasture over.

Jack surveyed his handiwork for a moment, enjoying the spectacle of bleating rothé running in circles before field hands frantically shouting and waving, trying to drive the stupid creatures out the open gates. Next he swaggered his way to the pastures on the far side of the tower, browbeating and threatening every field-slave and overseer he saw along the way. He could hear the confused lowing of the rothé as they scattered out into the open cavern beyond the pasture enclosures, trampling this way and that in the gloom somewhere beyond his sight. How much trouble that might cause the drow and their thrice-cursed overseers, Jack couldn’t say, but at the very least perhaps he’d done something to shake the dark elves’ confidence in their mastery of all they surveyed. It occurred to him that perhaps he might have been wiser to consider carefully the combination of impersonation and misdirection that would provide the best opportunity for him to make his escape, but then he abandoned the idea with a shrug. He was an improviser, not a planner. Didn’t they say perfect was the enemy of good enough?

He circled through the lakeside pastures, ordering slaves to set fire to the feed-cribs so that they could be purged of an imaginary rothé plague. It proved more difficult to convince the field-laborers to actually burn the troughs and granaries, but once he seized a torch and struck a light himself to provide an example, the rest of

the field hands quickly followed suit. Then Jack headed toward the bunkhouses and cribs surrounding Malmor's hut, near the entrance to the paddocks. Despite his bold actions elsewhere, Jack proceeded more carefully here, because there was an excellent chance he would run into Malmor himself, and Malmor, at least, would know that Jack was not him. He circled around the great mushroom-cribs where much of the rothé fodder was stored, and peered around the corner at the hovel where the bugbear slept. There was Malmor, standing just in front of his little bunkhouse, his face twisted in fury as he listened to half a dozen field-slaves and overseers all gabbling on at once about the rothé escaping from the paddocks.

"Hmm, now what?" Jack wondered. He heard a soft jingle of mail and arms behind him, then the soft sibilance of dark elves speaking among themselves. He quickly stole to the other end of the crib. A patrol of dark elf guards was hurrying down the road from the castle, no doubt coming to find out what in the world was going on in their fields.

Sudden inspiration struck Jack, and he acted upon it at once. He dashed back to the yard-facing edge of the mushroom-crib, picked up a stone, and hurled it at Malmor and his knot of overseers. It was a poor throw, missing the bugbear by several feet, but it did clip a nearby orc behind his right ear. The orc howled and fell; Jack shouted, "Hey, fathead!" and ducked back around the corner before Malmor and his henchmen could get a good look at him. Then he rushed to the other corner, scooped up a rothé patty, and leaped out in full view of the oncoming drow patrol.

"Malmor!" the drow-sergeant—as it happened, it was the warrior Varys—shouted. "What is the meaning of this? The rothé are escaping!"

"Stupid dark elves!" Jack retorted. "Catch your own rothé, your own rothé!" Then he flung the patty at Varys. It was a long throw, a good fifteen yards or more, but this time Jack's aim was unerring. The lump of dung sailed spinning through the air and struck Varys on his mailed shoulder as he vainly tried to duck out of the way; the dung splattered with great effect. The dark elves gaped in astonishment, stunned by the sudden suicidal defiance from their

lackey. Jack capered and flung another dung patty at the dark elves, then ducked back around the corner just in time as one or more of the dark elves fired their hand-crossbows at him.

From the yard-facing corner Jack heard the sudden rush of footsteps coming to meet him. “My work here is done,” he decided. He released his magical guise with a word of dismissal, and scrambled up the side of the crib. He threw himself into the foul-smelling mushroom feed just as Malmor and his overseers rounded one corner in furious pursuit, while Varys and the dark elves he led stormed around the other with murder in their eyes.

“Masters,” Malmor simpered at once. “What is—”

“Malmor,” the dung-splattered Varys snarled. “Oh, you will wish for a quick death before I am through with you. Kill the rest, but make sure the bugbear lives!”

The drow fell upon their slaves with merciless efficiency, blades flashing and crossbows singing. Two or three of the overseers went down at once beneath the murderous assault, while others threw themselves to the ground in terror or scattered to the four winds, thinking of nothing but getting away from the furious warriors. Malmor fell to his knees, cringing. “Malmor does not know what he has done, what he has done,” he wailed. “Please, masters, do not be angry, do not—” His groveling was cut off by the whistling impact of Varys’s stinging-rod, quickly joined by several more as the dark elves set about beating the bugbear as thoroughly and viciously as anybody had ever been beaten before.

Jack wormed his way over the top of the stored fodder and slipped out the other side of the crib. No one was close by, although he could see dark elves beating their overseers or chasing after fleeing ones here and there. He quickly stole his way across to Malmor’s shelter and ducked inside. The time had come to make his bid for freedom, even if he didn’t know exactly how it might fall out, and nothing he heard or saw from the dark elves outside dissuaded him. It was shaping up to be a very unpleasant time in the rothé fields for the indefinite future; clearly it was time to go.

Jack quickly ransacked Malmor’s possessions, looking for anything that might be useful in a trek through the Underdark. He found a

trunk of better clothing than he was now wearing, no doubt taken from past prisoners who'd fallen into the bugbear's power, and a pair of leather boots that couldn't have come close to fitting on Malmor's feet. He changed into the clean clothes, choosing the darkest colors he could find, donned the boots, and threw a battered old cloak around his shoulders for good measure. There was a good store of food in the form of rothé jerky, rothé cheese, and dried mushrooms of a somewhat more palatable variety than the fodder they fed to the livestock; Jack took as much as he could carry easily. He discarded a stinking wineskin filled with some sour vintage suitable only for a bugbear's palate, but salvaged two more waterskins that were reasonably clean. Finally, he found a well-worn old short sword of drow make, and a good knife.

He risked a quick glance from the doorway of the hovel. More dark elf warriors were on their way, hurrying to the paddocks from all sides. Slaves milled around in terror, groveled for their lives, or ran here and there out in the pastures, trying to corral bleating rothé. "Confusion prevails," Jack observed. "I should be on my way."

He sidled around the hovel until he reached the side facing away from the paddocks, and loped off into the gloom of the great cavern, doing his best to stay out of sight. Behind him, shouts of terror, cries of pain, and the thundering hoofbeats and bleating of hundreds of panicking rothé filled the air. He reached the cover of the treelike fungi across the road from the pastures, and paused to survey his handiwork for a moment.

"I regret that I am no longer able to remain in management of Lady Dresimil's pastures," Jack said aloud, addressing the shadow of the drow castle ahead. "It is unfortunate that my departure leaves the property in no small disorder, but I am electing to pursue new opportunities elsewhere. Oh, and I expect you will need to replace Malmor as well, as he has proven unreliable."

He hurried up the path leading toward the castle kitchens, keeping an eye open for drow soldiers coming the other way.

Two times Jack heard the jingle of mail in the gloom and hurriedly ducked off the path, hiding behind the great boles of tree-sized fungi dotting the cavern floor as dark elf patrols rushed down from the castle to quell the disturbances in the paddocks below. When he reached the door leading to the kitchens, he paused briefly to consider his options. A bold plan executed with confidence would be best, he decided. Jack brought the spell of disguise to mind again; he had already taxed his reserves of mystic strength, but he couldn't imagine a way to proceed without employing another spell. This time he crafted for himself the lean, fine-boned, ebony-skinned features of a dark elf, dressing himself in illusory mail and a long, dark cape. Whether Varys would be flattered by the imitation or not Jack couldn't say, but the guard-sergeant was the dark elf whose appearance he was most familiar with, and he judged that Varys would do for what he had in mind.

Squaring his shoulders and fixing his face in a contemptuous sneer, Jack sauntered up the path the remaining distance and strode into the kitchens as if he owned the place. Kitchen-slaves stopped their work and backed out his way, bowing and scraping. No other dark elves were in sight, but Jack was counting on that—he hadn't seen any drow in the kitchens on any of his previous visits. He permitted himself a small sigh of relief at finding his expectations confirmed, because if any fellow drow had addressed him in their native language he wouldn't have understood a word of it. With redoubled confidence Jack marched into the center of the bustling space, then turned in a slow, deliberate circle, studying each servant and slave in the room carefully.

The half-orc kitchen overseer Grelda approached carefully. "How can I help you, master?" she inquired with the mildest tone she could manage.

"Lord Jaeren requires a subject for a certain arcane experiment," Jack replied. "Female, human, preferably young and healthy. Show me all slaves who meet that description."

"This is a highly unusual request, master—" the kitchen-mistress began.

Jack wheeled on her with such vehemence that the woman quailed in fright. “You are half-human, are you not? And you appear healthy. I wonder if you might do?”

“Ah—ah—I am sure we can find some slave who is fully human, wise master,” Grelda gabbled. “It would be best to meet Lord Jaeren’s requirements exactly. Here, here, look at this one!” The kitchen overseer seized a thin, dull-eyed woman standing nearby and thrust her toward Jack; the poor scullery maid moaned in fear.

“Hmm, I think you can do better,” said Jack. He surveyed the room, seeing no sign of Seila. It was one thing to march into the kitchens he knew and pretend to be a dark elf, but he certainly didn’t want to have to search the castle for her. He made a show of examining several more unfortunate captives as he considered how to refine his ruse to send the half-orc specifically for Seila, but he feared that might begin to sound just a little suspicious. The longer he stood here in the kitchen, the more likely it was that something could go wrong. He was just about to reject the entire roomful of women and ask to see more, when a door opened and several laundresses appeared, carrying baskets full of dirty linens. They froze at once when they saw the rest of the kitchen hands waiting on Jack’s selection; Jack quickly hid a grin of relief when he saw that Seila Norwood was the second in the group.

“There, that one,” he said at once, pointing. “She meets all of Lord Jaeren’s requirements perfectly. You, there. Drop that basket and come with me.”

Seila stood stricken in terror. The kitchen overseer rounded on her and shouted, “You heard the master, you stupid slut. Go!”

Somehow, Seila overcame her fear enough to take one step, then another. She composed herself as best she could and came to stand before Jack. He looked her over, and turned back to Grelda. “And one more thing. Lady Dresimil instructed me to inform you that she grows weary of the customary menu. She doubts whether you season her dishes at all. If you value your life, you will prepare tonight’s meal with the most fiery spices you have at your disposal. She demands something that would, how did she put it, ‘char a

dragon's throat.' Send up your most fearsome effort, and pray that it is enough to pique her interest."

"Master–" the kitchen overseer began, but Jack turned his back on her and strode away with one curt motion to Seila to follow.

He led her out of the kitchens and down the path a good ways before turning to face her. Raising a finger to his lips to encourage silence, he allowed his magical disguise to fade away. She stared at him in surprise. "Jack?" she asked in a timid voice.

"Indeed," he answered. "I apologize for frightening you in the kitchens, but it was the best way I could think of to get you away from there."

"You have recovered your magic!"

"Enough to provide us with the means to escape from this place, I hope. Are you ready?"

"By all I hold holy, yes," Seila answered. "Better to die trying to win to freedom than to live another day as a slave to the drow."

"With luck we won't have to put that to the test," Jack replied. "Come, we'd better get away from the path and move quickly. If the dark elves piece things together, they will certainly organize pursuit—and after what I've done, I do not want to be caught."

Taking Seila's hand, he led her into the dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

The distant tumult of fighting and confusion from the pastures faded away quickly as Jack and Seila made their way into the fungal forest ringing the dark elves' tower. The shadows beneath the gigantic toadstools seemed to pool around the fugitives as they pressed on deeper into the gloom. Once or twice they heard small slithering movements or tiny clattering sounds, as unseen creatures moved about in the darkness around them. Jack tried hard not to dwell on what manner of creatures might be responsible for the sounds; he doubted that he would like the answer.

Seila's grip on Jack's hand tightened, and she pressed herself up close beside him. "Jack, I don't like this place," she whispered.

"I know. We won't linger a moment longer than we must," he replied softly. He glanced to her pale face and decided that it might be a good idea to distract her from the looming shadows and unsettling sounds around them. "Tell me, do the Norwoods still reside at Sarpentar House?"

She smiled nervously in the gloom. "Yes, it's my home, but no one's called it that since my grandmother's day. Everyone knows the estate as Norwood Manor now. Have you been there?"

"Once," Jack answered. "Who is the head of the family now?"

"My father, Marden." Seila's brow knitted. "He's been the Lord Norwood for thirty years or more. How long ago did you visit, Jack?"

He paused and motioned her to silence, standing still beneath the great fungal boles, looking and listening for any signs of pursuit. After a moment he nodded. "It seems quiet enough," he said softly, and drew her onward.

Seila followed close behind him. "You said before you hailed from the Vilhon Reach," she said. "Is that really true? I thought no one lived there anymore. It's a terrible plagueland, isn't it?"

Jack snorted to himself. Seila had a very good memory for detail, it seemed; he would have to be careful about what he said around her. “It seems that I am a man out of my time, so to speak,” he replied. Seeing the girl’s puzzled expression, he continued. “I’m afraid I do not belong to this age. I was magically imprisoned by some unknown enemy during the Year of the Bent Blade—thirteen hundred and seventy-six, by Dalereckoning. Apparently I passed the last hundred years in magical stasis, until Lady Dresimil and her followers stumbled across my prison and released me. I must say, I am so far very disappointed by the future.”

“You are playing games with me.”

“I wish that were so. If I could think of some simple proof of my claims, I would offer it.”

Seila walked beside him in silence for a time, evidently weighing the outrageousness of his story. Jack winced to himself. It might have been better to keep his origins to himself. The tale was simply too much to believe, even if it was the truth. After all, the first ingredient of a sound lie was plausibility—something his story was sorely lacking. He was just about to tell Seila to ignore it all as an odd little jest when she drew a sudden breath and looked at him again.

“There was a rumor in the kitchens a few days ago,” she said. “The drow discovered a swordswoman frozen in stone in the ruins of the ancient city. She’d been that way for decades, maybe even centuries. The diggers and porters say she came to life and fought her way free of the Chûmavh holdings. As I heard it, she cut down a dozen drow warriors before escaping into the tunnels.”

“The swordswoman was—is—the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan.”

“Myrkyssa Jelan? You are joking.”

“I see that her notoriety has endured until the present day.” He snorted softly. “I couldn’t imagine a more pleasant surprise for our pointy-eared friends than setting Myrkyssa Jelan free by mistake.”

“You mean that you were entombed like she was?”

Jack nodded. “Exactly, except that I was unpetrified immediately upon my release from the stone where we’d been imprisoned.”

“Of course,” Seila continued, now speaking more to herself than Jack. “In fact, there were stories in the kitchens that the drow had found another entombed in the ruins—a fool or madman, they said. That must have been you.”

“Fool or madman, indeed. Clearly the tale of my release became confused in the retelling. I dispute both characterizations.”

“You really lived in the time before the Spellplague?” Seila asked. “That is incredible! Unless, of course, it isn’t true, in which case you are the most inventive liar or most lucid madman I’ve ever met. What was it like, then?”

“I’ll be happy to share every recollection I have of what things were like in my day, but it’s hard to know where to begin,” Jack answered. He noticed that the gloom beneath the gigantic mushrooms was lessening; the boles seemed fewer and farther apart. “I haven’t yet seen the world above since my release, so I really don’t know what’s changed. I might as well ask you what it’s like to live in the current day.”

Seila frowned thoughtfully. “I can see where that might be true,” she replied. “Well, Raven’s Bluff in the current day has its flaws, but believe me when I say that it’s better than this place.”

“Ah, here we are,” Jack murmured. They emerged from the wide belt of fungal forest, several hundred yards inland from the dark lake’s exposed shore.

He paused a long time in the shadows of the titanic mushrooms, peering into the gloom to see what he could of the cavern floor ahead. The once-drowned drow city in which the wild mythal stood seemed to be the main focus of activity; dozens of soft-glowing globes of greenish light illuminated the various worksites where the slaves and servants of House Chûmavh toiled in their mysterious tasks. He nodded to himself, building up a picture of the place in his mind’s eye. The ancient ruins and the castle surroundings together made a sort of barbell-shaped footprint of habitation on the floor of the immense cavern, lying with one side pressed up against the sinister lakeshore. As long as they stayed well inland, they should be able to skirt the most heavily trafficked area … but of course they would also be on their own in the weird stone wilderness of

the Underdark, where all sorts of terrible monsters might lurk. Best not to share that part with Seila, he decided.

"Which way, Jack?" Seila asked.

"Our route to freedom lies about half a mile in that direction," Jack said, pointing. "We could follow the drow road and hope to bluff our way past any dark elves or overseers we meet along the way. Or we could strike out across the cavern floor. We'd be much less likely to meet passers-by, but I worry about running into a patrol on the lookout for escaping slaves." He thought about it for a moment, then made his decision. "Let's take our chances in the dark."

Seila shivered, but she nodded. "I am with you."

He took her hand, and led her out into the cavern floor.



Once they passed out of the shadows of the fungal forest, the ground became more broken and barren. Patches of strange fungi dotted the ground, spikes and clubs and round puffballs that stood two or three feet high and sometimes glowed softly with an evil blue luminescence. Jack gave these places a wide berth. Not only did he want to avoid the light, he simply didn't like the looks of the subterranean flora; it didn't seem like anything one would want to get too close to. Rough ridges of rock and sudden winding crevasses made the going more difficult still, but he didn't mind that as much, because the broken ground would make it that much harder for any watchful eyes to spot the two of them.

Seila stumbled over a stone lost in the gloom at their feet. "I wish we had a little more light," she whispered.

"It wouldn't be wise," Jack replied. "Even a candle flame would give us away. Stay close by me; you've been working in a well-lit castle for the last few tendays, but I spent that time out in the gloom of the fields."

They continued forward, Jack leading Seila more carefully, and came to an area where large stalagmites began to appear on the cavern floor. At the outskirts the stalagmites were only knee-high, but soon human-high pillars began to appear, then mounds the size

of houses, and finally huge needle-tipped monoliths that towered a hundred feet or more in height. “I recognize these,” Jack told Seila. “We’re getting close.”

Moving more cautiously, they rounded the base of a grand stalagmite that towered up into the darkness. The faint green witch-light of the dark elves’ floating globes illuminated a wide, level square of polished granite that stood between several more mighty stalagmites. Atop the square rested a circular platform of stone, perhaps twenty feet across. He’d traveled from the dungeons of Sarbreen down into this great cavern by means of this same platform the first (and only) time he’d ventured into the Underdark, held at swordpoint by the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan and her henchmen. “Good, it’s still here,” Jack breathed.

“What is this place?” Seila asked.

“An elevator, of sorts. I think the dwarves of Sarbreen built it during their city’s heyday so that they could descend to the Underdark when they needed to.” He smiled in the shadows. “Conveniently, it’s waiting for us on this level instead of hovering up at the top of its ascent. Now for the great gamble—does it still function?”

Seila touched his arm. “Jack, look,” she hissed.

He followed her gaze and frowned. Two huge trolls with axes bigger than he was stood off to one side, keeping watch under the supervision of a handful of dark elf guards. “That would seem to suggest the platform is operational,” he muttered to himself. “They wouldn’t bother to guard it otherwise.”

“How do we get by them?” Seila asked.

Jack thought it over for a moment. He could perhaps manage another spell of invisibility, but that of course would only work for one, not two. “A distraction,” he decided. “Wait here, quiet as a mouse. I might be a little while, but I’ll be back.”

“Jack, wait! What are you going to do?” Seila whispered urgently after him, but Jack slipped off into the darkness.

He stole halfway around the platform, using the large stalagmites for cover. Hunting around in the darkness for a few moments, he found several good-sized stones, then crept carefully into position.

The plan was still not quite clear in its entirety, but he'd already determined that the trolls were the key part of it; the creatures were legendary for their dim wits and short tempers. He took a moment to scout a path of easy retreat if things went poorly, then settled in to watch the dark elves and their trolls.

The drow—a young officer and three warriors—sat a short distance from the trolls, quietly conversing in their own language. One of the trolls dozed, seated with its back against a boulder, while the other was idly picking at something objectionable in its nether regions. Jack waited until none of the dark elves were looking, then he threw one of his stones at the dozing troll. It was a hard, accurate throw; it caught the big monster in its mouth, perhaps even cracking a tooth.

"Owww!" the troll roared. It clapped a huge hand to its mouth and glared at the other troll. "You hitted me wid a rock!"

"Did not," the second troll retorted angrily.

"Did, too!" The first troll seized the stone Jack had thrown and hurled it at its fellow. The small rock bounced off the innocent troll's shoulder, but not without provoking another yelp of pain. Both trolls scrambled to their feet, reaching for their axes.

"Stop that at once!" the dark elf captain barked at the trolls. The drow took two steps toward the tall monsters, hand on his swordhilt, icy menace in his face. The trolls cringed and subsided, apparently cowed for the moment. Jack scowled in the darkness. The monsters were supposed to be engaged in a furious brawl at this juncture, but instead they slowly took their seats again, glaring at each other.

A little more provocation, Jack decided. Perhaps something a little more incriminating might work? He waited a short time, until the dark elves returned to their conversation and the trolls became bored again. Then he crept forward with all the stealth and care he could muster, reaching around within arm's reach of the nearer troll to set a couple of his throwing-stones right under its long, gangly hand. Retreating back to his original position with a sigh of relief, he hefted his last stone and waited for the right moment. The first troll started to drowse again, the dark elves weren't looking … Jack

hurled his stone over the second troll's shoulder, this time winging the rock into the dozing troll's left eye.

The second troll caught a glimpse of the stone sailing by, and started to wheel around, looking for the thrower, but the first troll leaped to its feet with a roar of pure fury. "Owww! You hitted me again!"

"I not throw no rocks!" the second troll snarled back.

"Lying meat-bag!" the injured troll howled, a hand on one eye. He pointed accusingly with his other hand. "You got rocks right there!'

"I not *throw any rocks!*" the innocent troll roared in anger, any curiosity about the true origin of the rocks momentarily forgotten. But the first troll had had all it could take; it leaped upon its fellow with tooth and claw, and a trollish brawl broke out. The monsters pummeled, bit, and raked at each other with berserk fury. The dark elves drew their swords with various oaths and exclamations, and rushed over to break up the fight.

Jack hurried away from his hiding place as the dark elves waded in to separate the battling monsters, and quickly circled back to where he'd left Seila. She was staring at the furious brawl on the far side of the platform, and started when he hurried up beside her. "Was that your doing?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid I was the one throwing rocks," he admitted. "Now, follow me! Quick and quiet, and mind your step. We wouldn't want to give ourselves away with a stumble or a kicked pebble."

Together they moved out into the open, stealing swiftly across the granite square to the round platform at its center. Jack crouched low and drew Seila down beside him, trying hard to make himself as small as possible. Neither the drow nor their trolls seemed to take any notice; the monsters still roared and tore at each other, while the dark elves had their backs to the elevator platform, whipping and stabbing at the battling trolls. Motioning for Seila to remain still and silent, Jack started looking for a means to operate the stone disk. He remembered watching the wizard Yu Wei touching the heel of his staff to the surface … there. A faint rune was inscribed in the exact center of the stone platform. Jack knelt

down and touched it with his fingertips, wondering if he would have to speak some magical command to make the platform work. But it seemed that his touch was enough—with a small grating of stone, the platform shuddered and began to levitate up from its resting place.

The stone rose several feet from its place before the dark elves noticed its silent ascent. Then one of the warriors glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of the stone disk rising into the air. “The elevator!” he shouted in alarm.

The dark elf in command of the post whirled, turning his back on the brawling trolls. His eyes met Jack’s; the drow was a slight, young-looking fellow even by elven standards, his helmet and breastplate embellished with the silver trim of a captain. “Thralls trying to escape!” he snarled. “Stop them!”

The warrior who’d noticed the elevator turned a look of black ire on Jack and Seila, an ugly scowl creasing his handsome features. Jack reached for the short sword at his belt, hoping that he’d have to deal with only the one guard and that he’d be able to best a dark elf swordsman in his half-starved, half-exhausted condition. The drow took two quick steps toward the platform, preparing to spring aboard—but suddenly the brawling trolls fell off-balance. One threw the other stumbling across the guardpost, and the dark elf scrambling for the platform barely leaped out of the way as the huge monster reeled past him. The other two drow warriors dodged around the two trolls and lunged for the platform, but the levitating disk had climbed just enough to rise out of easy reach. One leaped to catch the edge, and even got his hand over the lip, but his leather gauntlet slipped from his hand; with a curse he dropped back down to the ground.

“That was close,” Seila whispered.

“Exactly as I intended,” Jack replied with a confident smile.

He straightened up as the dark elves and their trolls disappeared beneath the platform edge, sheathing his sword, then cautiously moved to the edge of the platform to see whether any of the drow pursued them. The dark elf soldiers peered up at the platform rising away from them. “There he is!” one shouted, raising a small

crossbow. The drow loosed a bolt up at Jack, who pulled back his head just in time as the missile hissed through the air.

"Please extend my regrets to Lady Dresimil," Jack called down to them. "I have just remembered pressing business elsewhere, and I am afraid I must cut short my visit." He withdrew a couple more steps from the edge, hand on the hilt of the battered old sword he'd taken from Malmor's quarters just in case any drow suddenly found a way to reach the ascending platform. He was only a middling swordsman, and he wouldn't have cared to face a skilled drow warrior in a fair fight … but fortunately it seemed that none of the dark elves could catch them.

"Dear Selûne, I thought they'd trapped us for a moment," Seila said.

"I was not concerned," Jack answered with confidence. He risked another peek over a different part of the platform's edge and saw one of the soldiers running off toward the barracks and defenses by the lakeshore. No doubt the fellow intended to report the escape.

"That is unfortunate," he muttered. If he remembered right, the stone disk took a good fifteen or twenty minutes to ascend and descend; that meant there would be a party of drow soldiers not much more than half an hour behind them when they reached the dungeons above. "We'd better assume that our captors will pursue with alacrity. I sincerely hope that Sarbreen is more or less the way I left it; we won't want to dilly-dally with the drow at our heels."

Seila allowed herself to sink to the disk's surface, slumping in exhaustion and relief. After a moment she looked back up to him. "How far does this … elevator-disk … ascend? What will we find above?"

"It's a thousand feet or more. If you are nervous about heights, you will want to stay right here in the center of the platform." Jack moved back to the center of the disk, and seated himself beside the girl. "As far as what awaits above, we'll find out soon enough."

Darkness pressed in around them as the disk rose steadily into the upper airs of the tremendous cavern, leaving behind the dim witch-

lights of the drow post below. A cold wind sank past the platform as they rose, moaning softly and catching at Jack's battered cloak and threadbare clothes; the stone disk trembled slightly in the stronger gusts, leaving Jack with the very unpleasant image of the whole thing suddenly flipping over in some unseen eddy of swirling winds.

Seila shivered in the icy breeze, and Jack took the liberty of putting an arm over her shoulder and spreading his borrowed cloak to cover them both as they huddled in the center of the platform. "For warmth," he explained.

She raised an eyebrow, but pressed herself close to his side—easily the most pleasant arrangement Jack had experienced since awaking on the stone plaza of the wild mythal. After a moment, she spoke. "How did you come to be imprisoned all these years?" she asked.

"That very question has vexed me for something like seven or eight tendays now," Jack answered; he had lost track of how much time had passed since he awoke at the foot of the mythal. "I cannot recall how I came to be in the mythal stone. I remember leaving my house in Mortonbrace, dressed quite splendidly for the occasion of a debutante ball at Daradusk Hall"—a ball that he was not strictly invited to, but Seila didn't need to know that, of course—"and climbing into a hired coach. That was a fine summer evening in the Year of the Bent Blade. Then my memory is simply blank for what does not seem a very long time, until I was rudely roused by Dresimil Chûmavh and her lackeys. I was wearing nothing but a pair of plain breeches; I suppose I should thank my enemy for at least sparing my modesty."

"So that is why you said you don't know who imprisoned you. Do you think your mind was affected by some enchantment, or is your lack of memory simply the result of being entombed for so long?"

Jack gave a small shrug. "I intend to investigate that question at my earliest convenience … well, just as soon as I devour a meal fit for a king, soak in a warm tub for at least half a day, burn these foul rags and dress myself in good clean clothes, and sleep for a tenday. Of course, I am penniless at the moment, which may make it difficult to sample each of those pleasures."

“Do not worry about that, Jack. If we reach the surface, I believe I can arrange all those things for you. The hospitality of Norwood Manor is yours.”

“As my social calendar is a century out of date, I gratefully accept.” Jack glanced up; there was a gleam of dim light above them, steadily growing brighter. They were drawing near to the lower levels of the dungeon of Sarbreen, which meant that Raven’s Bluff was only a few hundred rather perilous yards farther. “With a little luck, we’ll be back in the streets of the city in less than an hour. Strange to think that Chûmavhraele and Raven’s Bluff could coexist in such proximity, isn’t it?”

Seila frowned in the gloom. “Coexist? Hardly! The drow are a blight on the city. They don’t come to the surface, of course, but they have spies and agents everywhere. Slavery, smuggling, trade in drugs like kammarth or ziran, they’re at the bottom of at all.”

“Indeed? Why doesn’t the Lord Mayor do something about them?”

“No one seems to know what to do. My father’s been urging the Lord Mayor to act, but other lords and merchants and guildmasters are afraid to provoke the drow, while some don’t seem to care at all.”

Jack found that interesting; he wondered how many of the city fathers who didn’t seem to care were actually profiting by allowing affairs to continue in their current state. If the dark elves didn’t come to the surface themselves, they had to be working through human intermediaries to catch their slaves and peddle their illicit wares. It seemed that civic corruption was every bit as widespread as it had been in his own time, if not more so. The thought was a little comforting in its own way; there would be opportunities for a clever, resourceful fellow such as himself in the world above, including plenty of wealthy people who deserved to be separated from their ill-gotten gains.

“I think we’re near the top,” Seila said, interrupting his thoughts.

Jack glanced up again, and saw that the dim beacon overhead was indeed drawing near. “So we are. The platform stops at a small landing in the ceiling of this great cavern. We’ll leave the elevator there, and make our way through Sarbreen.”

“I’ve heard that Sarbreen is full of monsters,” Seila said.

“It was in my day. I’m afraid this part of my plan relies on luck; I’m hoping we can creep past anything dangerous without attracting notice.” They climbed to their feet, crouching low to make themselves just a little harder to see as the ancient dwarven elevator ascended into its upper landing. “Ah, there we go. Quiet now, dear Seila. The disk may carry us into danger.”

Just as Jack remembered, the disk came to a stop hovering in mid-air in the upper end of a narrow crevasse. A wide ledge of even stone with a dark doorway marked the place where the dwarves of old Sarbreen had carved their way into the uppermost reaches of the titanic cavern below their buried city. A single lamp of yellow crystal was fixed to the wall like an odd little porchlight. Whatever magic it held still endured after all the years, casting a warm golden glow over the landing. Between the stone ledge and the floating disk a battered wooden pier or walkway leaned out over the dreadful drop; the walkway creaked softly and swayed in the strong draft flowing down to the depths below.

Seila eyed the catwalk nervously. “The bridge doesn’t inspire confidence,” she said.

“That is our path,” Jack replied. “Remember, the dark elves use this elevator enough to keep a watch posted below; I’m sure it’s perfectly safe. Would you prefer that I go ahead to test it, or should I follow behind to steady you?”

“I’m not quite that frail, thank you. After you, Jack.”

Jack walked to the edge of the disk, trying not to dwell on the way it bobbed gently in the air currents. It’s just like stepping from a boat onto a dock, he told himself. Gingerly he tapped his toe on the other side of the foot-wide gap of darkness between the stone platform and its wooden dock, then leaned across to put more weight on the ramp. It seemed steady enough, so he stepped all the way across and trusted his whole weight to the ancient woodwork. It creaked, but held. “Well, that wasn’t so bad,” he said.

He turned and held out his hand for Seila, who started to step over the gap—just as the platform gave a small lurch and started to sink again. Caught in mid-stride over the unthinkable drop, Seila gave a

small cry and flailed for balance, but Jack quickly seized her arm and pulled her up to the old wooden ramp. They retreated to the safety of the stone ledge, and stood trembling by the dark doorway as the elevator platform descended out of sight.

"It dropped out from under me," Seila said, gulping for breath.

"The dark elves must have summoned it to its lower landing," Jack replied. He belatedly realized that he'd just assumed that the disk had to complete its ascent before returning to the lower landing, and tried not to dwell on what would have happened if he'd been wrong about that. "I expect it will be back soon enough with angry dark elf warriors aboard." He glanced at the old wooden ramp again, and briefly considered sabotaging it in some way to delay their pursuers. Even the fierce drow might be daunted by a ten-foot leap to reach the ledge, if the ramp could be removed in its entirety … but that would take quite a bit of work. He settled for wrenching one timber handrail out of place, and heaved it over the edge.

"What was that for?" asked Seila.

"Well, with luck, that board will fall a thousand feet or so and find a dark elf's pointy head," Jack answered. "Failing that, I hope it might make them pause and wonder if we will drop more debris on them as they ascend, or whether the ramp has been sabotaged. Now, let's see what waits for us in Sarbreen."

Seila reached up and took the ancient glowing crystal out of its place by the doorway. Its glow dimmed, but it still threw off enough light to see by. Jack took her hand again, and led the way into the doorway. They found themselves in a long, straight tunnel with a smooth floor of joined stone blocks, which was much as Jack remembered it. A walk of eighty or ninety yards brought them to a circular doorway at the end of the passage.

He motioned for Seila to shield her crystal lamp, hoping to avoid giving off any more light than they absolutely had to, and turned his attention to the round stone plug. There was no handle or mechanism in sight, but Jack remembered this door well. He whispered the words of an opening spell, and reached out to rest his palm on the cold stone. For a moment, nothing happened, and he

wondered for one terrible instant if their drow pursuers would find them here in half an hour or so, stymied by the door. Then the stone seemed to grow misty and fade into nothingness, creating a doorway to a wide, dark space beyond. Jack hurried forward and peered out into the great hall beyond the vanished door; nothing was waiting to eat him, at least not right away.

"Come on," he whispered to Seila, motioning for her to follow. Together they advanced through the doorway into a striking chamber. The room was the size of a king's banquet hall, with shadowed galleries ringing its walls and an arched ceiling high overhead. He turned and looked behind them; the round doorway they'd come through was part of a colossal frieze on the chamber's rear wall. A coiling dragon of stone, easily forty feet tall, was carved into the chamber wall, posed in such a way that its foreclaws appeared to grasp a mighty orb or pearl—the round aperture they'd just emerged from.

Jack turned Seila to see the great image behind them. She gasped in wonder. "My friend Ilyth called this the Stone Dragon of Sarbreen," he said softly. A pang of loss touched him in the center of his chest; Ilyth must be in her grave fifty years or more by now. Seila reminded him of her, when he thought about it. "We are standing in the Hall of the Dragon, the meeting-place of Sarbreen's nobles and guildmasters."

"It's magnificent," the noblewoman said. "I never knew anything like this was just below my feet."

"Most sane and well-balanced people are naturally ignorant of what lies in the dungeons below the city," said Jack. "Adventurers, on the other hand, are familiar with a number of such landmarks, although I hasten to add that dungeon-delving was something I indulged in only under the most unusual circumstances. Remind me to tell you about my discovery of the Guilders' Vault someday; it's quite a story. Now, let's be on our way. This is no good place to linger."

He led her down the length of the Hall of the Dragon toward another shadowed archway at the foot of the hall. Near the middle of the room they passed two broken skeletons, still dressed in the

torn remnants of mail and leather. A sword snapped cleanly in two gleamed on the floor just beyond the outstretched fingers of one of the old bodies. Jack hurried Seila past the two corpses, trying not to think too hard on the question of what ripped open armor of mail and plate and broke the bones of the men inside. Most likely the skeletons had been lying in that spot for years, but it was far from a certainty. Sarbreen's dungeons had their share of small scavengers that could strip a corpse to bare bone in a matter of days.

The archway at the far end of the hall led into the bottom of a great shaft or well. Old stone steps climbed upward out of sight, spiraling up the wall of the shaft. "This part is quite a climb," he said softly. "Keep your shoulder to the wall in case the steps prove dangerous. And be ready to cover that crystal light when I tell you to."

Seila nodded in reply, and they began to climb the stairs. Jack lost count after fifty or so, but the steps continued to wind up and up long past that place, until his legs trembled and ached and he panted for breath in the cold, dank air. After all, rediscovering how to work magic did nothing to make up for tendays and tendays of meager rations and exhausting labor. Seila was breathing hard behind him, but she seemed to be standing up to the effort quite well; she was far from frail, and Jack guessed that slaves in the kitchens found ways to eat better than those condemned to work in the quarries and fields. Finally, when he felt as if he couldn't make himself climb one more step, he glimpsed the end of the stairs. Slowly they clambered out onto level ground again, and found themselves standing in an alcove in the side of a long, broad passageway. Archways and chambers beckoned in several directions.

"Where are we now?" Seila whispered.

"A region of the old dwarven city known as the Armory," Jack replied between breaths. He leaned forward, massaging his trembling legs with his hands as he rested for a moment and tried to remember his bearings. "Sarbreen's weaponsmiths and armorers lived and worked in this area. We're not very far from the surface."

Seila started to ask another question, but he motioned her to silence, and calmed his breathing to listen for any signs of pursuit.

At first he heard nothing, which was more or less what he expected; he didn't really believe that the drow could have overtaken them yet. The dungeon's depths were eerily still, with a near-complete absence of sound that seemed almost pregnant with menace. Then he caught a soft clicking sound from the passage to his left, with a sort of dull scraping thump.

Seila heard it as well. "Jack—" she whispered.

"Hide the light," he hissed, drawing her quickly to the right. He pulled her across the hallway and ducked into another archway as Seila hurriedly swaddled the old rock-crystal from the landing in the folds of her tunic. Darkness settled around them, relieved by only the merest hint of a dull warm glow shining through the cloth. Jack held his breath, hoping that whatever was passing by would keep on its way. The clicking came closer, now accompanied by a strange creaking sound. Then the sounds stopped. Peering down the hallway from their hiding place, Jack realized he could make out several dim violet lights gleaming in the shadows, hovering near the passage ceiling. The faint lights swayed slowly from side to side, moving in unison, then more came into view … eyes! Jack realized. Four eyes, and they're looking right at us.

With a sudden loud clacking and an eager roar, *something* barreled down the hallway toward the two humans. Jack pulled Seila back into the passage behind him, and discovered a floor strewn with rubble that shifted and clattered under his feet. The girl stumbled on the uneven ground, but even as their unknown assailant lunged closer, she yanked out the cloaked crystal-lamp and revealed its full strength. "Get back!" she shouted—either advising Jack to flee or trying to scare off the monster closing in on them.

The lamp was not terribly bright, but in the near-blackness of the dungeon hallway, it was as dazzling as a careless glance at the sun. Jack caught a glimpse of giant mandibles and huge armored claws, an apelike body covered in plates of chitin, and two pairs of eyes reflecting golden light. "Oh, damn it all," he muttered. "An umber hulk. Why not?"

He almost jerked Seila out of her shoes as he sprinted away, fleeing across the rubble-strewn chamber. He had never seen an umber hulk before, but he'd heard plenty of stories from battered adventurers recounting the terrors of Sarbreen in taprooms and alehouses. "Try not to look it in the eye," he said over his shoulder. "It can knock you senseless or mesmerize you with its gaze!"

"I'm more worried about its gigantic claws and fangs, thank you," Seila cried.

They fled from one chamber to another, darting across room after rubble-filled room while the massive umber hulk crashed along through the stonework and debris behind them like a living avalanche. Jack didn't remember this part of Sarbreen all that well, but he tried to head in the general direction of the dungeon entrance he knew was somewhere nearby. He took a wrong turn that very nearly proved lethal, ducking into a blind alcove where he expected a passageway. The monster roared and smashed one huge armored claw at its small prey; Jack leaped aside, and instead of crushing him the blow hammered into the stone wall with such force that the polished stone blocks dressing the walls bounced out of place and fell in a shower of dust and stone.

The hulk roared again as heavy stone blocks pummeled its carapace, and then it retreated. "Come on!" Jack shouted to Seila. He took one step to flee while the monster was on its heels, but the noblewoman stood stock-still, gazing up at the monster's glimmering eyes with a blank expression. Jack swore viciously, realizing that she'd been disoriented by the hulk's confusing gaze. Turning his back on the massive creature so that he wouldn't catch even an inadvertent glimpse of all four eyes at close range, he shoved her headlong through a narrow gap in the masonry wall and scrambled after just as the next huge claw hammered down in the spot where he'd been standing.

The monster screeched in anger at their escape and began tearing at the wall with such force that rock and rubble flew from its claws. It would only be a moment before it forced its way after them; Jack dragged Seila to her feet and ran through the next doorway. He found himself in a small, twisting passage linking the

weaponsmiths' halls and workshops, and darted away from the crashing and roaring of the huge creature behind them. By a stroke of great good fortune he'd found a hallway that was somewhat too small for the monster pursuing them. The umber hulk had to crouch and twist to ram itself into the passageway, flailing great chunks of masonry out of its way as it sought to widen the opening.

They emerged in a larger hallway, near a great gate of iron that had been twisted and pulled from its place hundreds of years earlier. Scores of ancient, yellowing skeletons, some still dressed in the rusting remnants of their armor, were scattered around the floor —defenders of Sarbreen who had fallen defending the iron gate. "I know where we are," Jack said to Seila.

She was coming out of the stupor the umber hulk's gaze had inflicted upon her; she shook her head vigorously, as if to clear the cobwebs from her thoughts. "Go, go!" she cried. "It's still behind us!"

Together they ducked under the twisted remnants of the mighty doors and ran down the hallway beyond. Several dark doorways and passages branched off to either side, but Jack ignored them. At the third doorway on their left, he turned and found a dusty old stairway climbing up into the gloom. Without hesitation he led Seila up the steps, taking them two at a time, until he came to an old wooden trapdoor at the top. Jack pushed, but found the trapdoor too heavy to move. "This may prove unfortunate," he said aloud. "Quickly, Seila—put your shoulder to the door. Together, on three —one, two, three!"

Jack and Seila threw themselves up at the trapdoor, straining with all their might. The door rose a little and stopped, seemingly blocked or held … and then something above gave way with a crash, and the trapdoor flew open. They scrambled up into a dusty old warehouse full of small barrels, casks, and heavy sacks of burlap. Jack saw that a rusty iron clasp with a bolt had secured the trapdoor from above; he and Seila had pushed hard enough to strip the bolts securing the clasp to the door, at which point the whole thing had flown open. Quickly he slammed the trapdoor shut again, and began stacking heavy barrels on top of it.

“You don’t think that thing will follow us all the way up here?” Seila asked.

“I have no idea, but the drow might,” Jack replied. Seila joined him in rearranging the casks and crates stored in the warehouse, until the trapdoor was virtually buried beneath them. Then Jack looked around for an egress, and spotted a bolted door on the other side of the room. He gestured to Seila; they hurried over, drew the bolt, and threw open the door to find a small city alleyway on the other side.

They emerged from the cluttered warehouse into a gray, foggy morning. It was probably fortunate that it wasn’t broad daylight; even the gray gloom of early morning seemed overwhelmingly bright to Jack, and he had to shade his eyes with his hands and squint to keep from being blinded outright. He took a deep breath and tasted the myriad familiar odors of the city: The damp salty smell of the sea, the acrid smoke of countless cooking fires, the reek of furnaces and kilns, the delightful aroma of bread baking and meats sizzling, even the earthy stink of dung and refuse clinging to the gutters and outhouses. Not all of it was pleasant, but it was vital and alive, and the happy clamor of his city waking to a new day was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard.

He caught Seila’s hand and squeezed her fingers in his, grinning like an idiot. She was beaming, too, standing with her eyes closed and face uplifted to the damp gray sky. “I never thought I would see daylight again,” she said. “Oh, Jack, how can I ever thank you?”

An idea or two came to mind immediately, but he decided it would be unchivalrous to mention them. Instead he gave her a small bow and said, “You mentioned the hospitality of your father’s table. That would be an excellent start. After that, a very long soak in a hot bath, and perhaps a change of clothing.”

An avid light came into Seila’s eyes at the mention of a hearty meal and a warm bath. “The sooner, the better,” she agreed. “Now where in Raven’s Bluff are we?”

Jack looked around, taking in his surroundings. None of the buildings seemed familiar … but the shape of the street was much as he remembered. “This is Olorin’s Lane, isn’t it? In Burnt Gables?”

Seila smiled at him. “There you go again. The neighborhood is called Sindlecross these days.”

“Ah, well. I hope you’ll forgive a gap of a hundred years.” Jack grinned at her, finding himself almost giddy from relief. Escaping captivity and torment in the hands of the drow, surviving the monster-haunted halls of Sarbreen, and rescuing a noble-born lass in the bargain … this was shaping up as one of his greatest exploits. “Clearly, I have much to relearn about Raven’s Bluff.”

Seila reached out and grasped Jack’s hand. “Leave that to me,” she said. “You’ve rescued me from toil and misery in the Underdark, Jack. Showing you around Raven’s Bluff is the least I can do.”

Together, they ventured out into morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Norwood Manor was much as Jack remembered it from his long-ago visit. Most of the furnishings were different, but a few pieces of décor remained after a century of absence—the great chandelier in the foyer was still there, the coats of arms in the upper hallway seemed the same, and even a couple of portraits in the parlor remained. Seila and her mother were delighted when he mentioned the similarities to them, but he carefully omitted sharing many details of his previous visit. It was only about three years ago by his reckoning (since, after all, a hundred years of slumber had passed as little more than a single night's sleep). On a snowy evening in the Year of Rogue Dragons he'd slipped into an elegant midwinter's ball at Sarpentar House by posing as a caterer, and he had spent a very profitable evening working the glittering crowd of guests as a pickpocket before seducing a rather intoxicated noble lass who'd mistaken a careless pat for attention of a different sort. In fact, Jack had very pleasant memories of the third-floor linen closet … but Seila and the Norwoods didn't need to know that, thank you.

For two full days, Jack did nothing but bask in the gratitude of Seila's family and retainers. After three months of captivity, Seila had been given up for lost. As her rescuer, Jack was treated very well indeed in Norwood Manor. He slept as long as he liked, bathed in steaming hot baths until he finally eradicated the lingering aroma of the rothé paddocks, ate like a king, and refined the dramatic tale of his rescue of the beautiful Seila until he even impressed himself with his bravery, wit, and resourcefulness. He was introduced to a bewildering array of noble Ravenaars, beginning with Seila's mother Idril, a dozen aunts and uncles and cousins, and then scores of nobles of other families who flocked to Norwood Manor on hearing of Seila's return from the Underdark. Her father Marden was away in Tantras on family business, but Idril Norwood dispatched a courier at once to summon him back.

On the morning of the third day since their escape from Sarbreen, Jack was roused from his luxurious bed in one of the manor's guestrooms by Seila, who wore a green riding-dress that matched her striking green eyes (a charming feature of hers he hadn't noticed in the gloom of the Underdark). "Up and out of bed, Jack," she said. "It's a fine spring day without a cloud in the sky, and I have an open carriage waiting in the drive. I think it's time to give you the grand tour of Raven's Bluff."

Despite the fact that he was really quite comfortable in the great feather bed, Jack's curiosity asserted itself. He was not yet fully recovered from his toils in Tower Chûmavhraele—he could stand to regain another ten pounds or so, in his judgment—but his curiosity about this new age in which he found himself had been growing each day. "An excellent suggestion, my dear," he said. He threw off the coverlets and climbed to his feet; Seila obligingly turned her back while he changed from his sleeping robe into the borrowed clothes the Norwoods had found for him, pulling on warm gray woolen breeches and a padded vest of fine blue velvet over a cream-colored shirt. He paused at the washbasin to splash some water on his face and quickly check the trim of the neat goatee that had replaced months' worth of scraggly beard growth, then threw a heavy scarlet cape over his shoulders and selected a feathered cap.

When he was ready, he followed Seila down to the manor's foyer and out to the waiting buggy, where a liveried driver waited with a dapple-gray mare in harness. They climbed into the seat and spread a blanket over their laps before the driver clucked to his horse and set off at an easy trot.

Norwood Manor stood about five miles north of the city, on a fine piece of land that stretched all the way to the bluffs overlooking the Dragon Reach. Jack settled in to enjoy the ride, taking in the scattered estates, manor houses, and country homes of the Ravenaar nobility, broken up by small farmsteads and wide swaths of woodland. "So far it seems much the same," he said to Seila after a mile or so. "Most of these grand old houses were here back in my day. That one there is Daradusk Hall, is it not?"

“It is. Baron Ostin Daradusk is the head of the family these days.” Seila tapped the side of her head. “A very eccentric fellow by most accounts. The man is terrified of vampires and never ventures from his house after sundown.”

“Have he or his family suffered from a vampire’s attack?”

“Not that anyone knows of, but Baron Daradusk claims that only proves that his methods are effective.”

Jack chuckled. “I suppose he also takes credit for keeping away the elephants, too.” He pointed at another manor, this one a lofty house on a high knoll of the mountain that crowded in on Raven’s Bluff from the northeast. “And that is Daltabria, isn’t it? One of the De Sheers’s estates?”

“No longer. It belongs to the Hawkynfleur family now. The De Sheers died out thirty or forty years ago when old Lady Niune passed without children.”

“Niune, really?” Jack shook his head. “I knew her. Not well, mind you, but I could pick her out of a crowd even if she wouldn’t have known me.” Strange to think that a young noblewoman with scarcely twenty-five winters to her had lived out her entire life and died as an old woman in Seila’s time—well, the time of Seila’s parents, anyway. He wouldn’t be surprised if Idril Norwood or her husband had met Niune when they were younger, because they were practically neighbors. Why, there might be very old people today who’d been babes when he was so strangely imprisoned. “Or, for that matter, any number of dwarves or elves,” he murmured aloud.

“What was that?”

“It just occurred to me that while there are probably no humans alive who knew me before, there might be some nonhumans who remember me. Dwarves and elves and other such folk live much longer than we do, after all.”

“Did you know many?”

“Only a handful, really. Still, we should try to look up one or two.” Jack grinned at her. “If nothing else, I would dearly love to offer some proof of my outrageous claims.”

“I believe you, Jack.”

“Which I greatly appreciate, my dear, but I suspect that many others will find my story harder to credit.” He leaned forward to address the driver. “My good fellow, by any chance do you know where a taphouse called the Smoke Wyrm stands? It used to lie on an alley off Vesper Way, in Torchtown.”

“It’s still there, sir. They brew a very good stout, but one to be enjoyed in moderation.”

“Drive us there when we enter the city. If I recall, it’s hard by the north gate, anyway.”

“Do you think someone you know might still be found there?” Seila asked.

“It seems unlikely, but one never knows. If nothing else, the current owners might know what became of him.”

As they neared the city’s northern gate, Jack noticed that the woods that had once grown close up to the city walls had been cut back by a bowshot at some point in the past. The small cluster of buildings that had once stood just outside the gate was gone as well. Evidently Raven’s Bluff had faced some threat from the northern road, and readied itself to fight off an attack. He added it to the long list of questions he had about what had transpired in the years he’d been absent. The driver paused at the gate, where a half-dozen guards questioned everyone entering the city, but they were quickly waved through—the soldiers knew the Norwoods by sight and were careful not to annoy an important noble family.

The Tantras Road became Manycoins Way at the city gate; Jack looked about eagerly, noting many details that he’d missed in his exhaustion and light-blindness when he and Seila had found a carriage to take them to her family’s manor a few days before. Raven’s Bluff was surprisingly unchanged, for the most part. Perhaps four in five of the buildings Jack remembered from his own time still stood, although some had fallen into disrepair and others had been reshingled or painted in new colors. Most of the businesses and shops seemed to have changed hands at least once.

His wonder must have shown; Seila watched him with a wide smile on her face. “You seem overwhelmed,” she offered.

“I am. It’s very much the same, but different in so many of the details,” Jack answered. “There was a guide service in that barrister’s office, and that building under the sign of the Blue Basilisk Coster I knew as the Black Flame merchant house.” He turned his attention to the people thronging the street, and frowned. “Hmm. Fashions have changed a good deal while I’ve been … away. The cut of clothing is different, and most of the men are clean-shaven. Is my goatee out of style now? I can see that I shall have to adjust my grooming and seek advice about gentlemen’s fashions.”

The driver turned onto Vesper Way and drove two more short blocks before stopping in front of the taphouse Jack remembered. He could see at once that it had been expanded once or twice, and in fact sported a brand new sign with a painting of a sleeping dragon, smoke from its nostrils encircling its head. Jack hopped down from the carriage and gave Seila his hand as she climbed down after him. They descended a short flight of steps to the taphouse entrance—the common room was in the cellar—where Jack tried the door and found it locked. He gave it a firm rap with his knuckle. It was probably not much later than ten bells of the morning; there wouldn’t be many taphouses open at this hour.

After a moment, he heard heavy footsteps from within, and a small clatter of dishware. Then the door rattled as its bolt was drawn, and it opened from inside. A dark-haired dwarf in a leather apron with gold rings in his thick black beard looked up at them. “Sorry, goodfolk,” he grunted. “We’re not open yet. Come back in an hour.”

Jack peered at the fellow, wondering. Could it be? “Tharzon?” he asked tentatively.

“No, that’s me da,” the dwarf said. “I’m Kurzen.”

The rogue shook his head. Tharzon’s son looked just like Tharzon had, well, a hundred years ago. He tried to find a way to say that without confusing the poor fellow, and settled for asking, “Is Tharzon still … here?” After so many years, it simply seemed impossible that he might still be the proprietor of the Smoke Wyrm.

“Aye. What’s your business with him?”

“I’m an old friend.”

Kurzen squinted at Jack. “I’m near sixty years old, and I’ve never seen you before. Give me your name, then.”

“Tell Tharzon that Jack Ravenwild is at his doorstep,” Jack said. “I’ll wait.”

The dwarf grunted and closed the door. Seila glanced at Jack. “Ravenwild?” she asked.

“A nickname,” Jack explained. “Tharzon and I were sometimes engaged in ventures that wouldn’t have been entirely sanctioned by the civil authorities.” He heard Kurzen’s steps receding inside, and the distant sound of deep voices from somewhere inside. He gave Seila a quick wink. A moment later there came a cry in Dwarvish, and a sudden rush of footsteps toward the door, punctuated by a thumping or knocking sound. Then the door flew open wide again, and Jack found himself gazing upon the aged features of Tharzon the dwarf. If Tharzon had once looked very much like his son did today, he did no longer. His beard was gray, his face was lined with deep wrinkles, and most of the hair on top of his head had gone the way of last year’s snows. He was thinner than Jack remembered, too. The old dwarf’s shoulders were more hunched, and he leaned on a heavy cane—but the dark, fierce eyes and bushy brow were the same.

“Good morning, Tharzon,” Jack said. “I’ll wager you’d thought you’d seen the last of me.”

“Impossible,” the old dwarf whispered. “Impossible!”

“Not impossible, my old friend, merely highly improbable,” Jack answered. He glanced up at the taphouse and nodded in approval. “I like what you’ve done with the place. Hard to believe you’ve kept it for a hundred years.”

“Are you well, Da?” Kurzen said to his father. “If this fellow troubles you, say the word, and I’ll run him off for you.”

Tharzon stood, his mouth agape, for a long moment, and then he managed to shake his head. “No, my boy, no. Don’t you know who you’re looking at? This is the man that found the Guilder’s Vault and defeated the Warlord herself. Did you not listen to any of the stories I told you when you were a youngster?”

“But that’s not possible,” Kurzen protested. “Why, he’d have to be a hundred and thirty years old! That’s no great age for our folk, but not so for a human.”

“Nevertheless, here I am,” said Jack. “Seila, this is my old comrade in arms, Tharzon Brewhammer. Tharzon, this is my new friend, Lady Seila Norwood of the Norwood family.”

“The noblelady as was rescued from the thrice-damned drow the other day?” Tharzon replied. “Don’t be so surprised, the story’s all over the town. A pleasure to meet you, m’lady. Please, come in. Come in! Jack Ravenwild, as I live and breathe. What a day!”

The old dwarf led the way into the empty taphouse, and motioned for his son to set up a table and chairs. “What can we draw for you fine folk?” he asked.

“It’s a little early in the day for me,” Seila replied. “I don’t suppose you have some tea?”

“I’d ask if you still brew Old Smoky, but I won’t get far today if I started now,” Jack said. “Better make it your mildest lager.”

“Suit yourself, then,” Tharzon replied. Kurzen retreated to the bar, and soon returned with mugs for Jack, his father, and himself, and a plain kettle and teacup for Seila. “Where have you been for all these years, you scoundrel? How is it that you turn up a hundred years after the last time I saw you, not looking a day older?”

Kurzen frowned at Jack. “Doesn’t seem right, Da. Maybe he’s one of those … undead.”

Tharzon harrumphed. “Use your eyes, boy. Did you not see the sun shining outside? It’s no weather for such things as ought to be in their graves.”

“Someone imprisoned me with magic, Tharzon,” Jack replied. “They entombed me in the old mythal stone where we fought Jelan and her sellswords, and left me there. I might have gone on sleeping until the end of days, but the drow took it into their heads to meddle with the wild mythal and released me just a few tendays ago.” He took a sip of his lager and nodded in appreciation. Trust dwarves to know their business with a good ale. “Which reminds me: Do you have any idea who might have encysted me in an ancient ruin half a mile deep in the Underdark? I have no memory

of the event, and I would dearly like to find out who used me with such malice."

"Those of us who knew you wondered about that for years, Jack," Tharzon said. "You simply vanished one night without a word to anyone. Most folk assumed that you'd run afoul of some enemy who'd chained an anchor to your feet and dumped you in the harbor, although there were some as held that you'd fled to safer parts after angering some high and powerful person with your … indiscretions."

"Did no one think to look for me?" Jack asked.

"Oh, we checked your usual haunts. Anders looked for you for some time, because he was of the opinion that you owed him a great deal of coin. But naught ever came of it."

Seila regarded Jack with a raised eyebrow. "It seems you had some interesting associations in your earlier life, Jack," she observed.

"I was the victim of jealousy, misunderstandings, and false accusations, dear Seila. All would naturally have been answered in due course, clearing my good name and confounding my enemies, if only a lost century had not intervened." Jack returned his attention to Tharzon. "Where was I last seen? In whose company? Were there any noted villains or malefactors in town who seemed especially pleased by my disappearance?"

"It's been a long time, Jack." The old dwarf frowned, thinking hard on the question. "I seem to remember that the Knights of the Hawk were looking for you, but then again, that wasn't terribly unusual. There was a ball at some noble manor where you made some sort of scene, and as far as anyone could tell, you never came home."

"Which manor?"

"You would know better than I," Tharzon replied, but seeing that Jack was serious about the question, he fixed his gaze on the taproom's great stone hearth, his brow knotting as he delved deeper and deeper into his memories. Jack began to wonder if his old friend had actually fallen asleep with his eyes open, but then the

dwarf grunted. “Ah, there it is,” he muttered at last. “Sevencrown Keep. You certainly indulged your ambitions in those days, Jack.”

“The Leorduins? What business did I have with them?” Jack wondered aloud. The Leorduins were a very rich and very prickly family, indeed. Had they caught him in some scheme? If so, what scheme was it? Or had he simply gone to the Leorduin affair, whatever it was, to maneuver toward some other noble mark?

“How did you finally escape from your magical prison?” Tharzon’s son Kurzen asked. “You’d already been there a hundred years or so. What broke the spell?”

“Ah, that I think was an accident,” said Jack. “The drow had no idea that someone had been entombed within their old mythal stone. They were at work restoring its old spells, and their magic interfered with the encystment in which I slept, releasing me. They asked me how I’d come to be in their mythal, heard me out, agreed that my story was fascinating, and promptly condemned me to slavery once they’d decided they had no other use for me.”

“A black-hearted race, and that’s no lie,” Tharzon agreed. He looked over to Seila. “Is that where you come into the tale, my lady?”

Seila nodded. “I was traveling on the Tantras Road with one of my father’s caravans when a large party of brigands ambushed us. They took me and most of our people captive, and sold us to the dark elves. I was sent to the tower kitchens, and met Jack a tenday or so later. It took a long time, but eventually he managed to arrange our escape.”

“That’s a tale I’d like to hear,” Tharzon said. “How did you do it?”

“I’m glad you asked, friend Tharzon,” Jack replied. He immediately launched into a recounting of his toils among the drow, his befriending of Seila, and his daring escape. If his telling of the tale perhaps overemphasized his own cleverness, stoicism, and personal bravery, well, that was merely a bit of artistic license. After all, it was his story to tell, and he ought to be able to tell it as he liked, as long as he avoided embellishing the parts Seila could corroborate. Half an hour passed as Jack lingered on every detail and described every perilous development, during which he finished

his first lager and embarked on a second, until finally he concluded with their arrival in the alley in Sindlecross. Even Kurzen left his work to listen to the story, caught up despite himself.

"Well done, Jack, well done," Tharzon said in approval when Jack finished. "You always had a daring streak in you."

"It was nothing," Jack replied with false modesty, waving away Tharzon's praise.

"You can bet that the drow won't believe it to be nothing," Kurzen warned. "The dark elves have long memories, and they never let a slight pass without answer. You'd best watch your back, Jack Ravenwild."

"I am not concerned," Jack answered. "The drow do not frighten me; I have their measure now."

Kurzen shook his head at Jack's reply. "They have their eyes and ears in the city. I would not be so quick to dismiss them. If I were you, I'd lay low for a time." The young dwarf rose and returned to his work at the bar.

Jack took a long pull from his mug, and then he looked back to Tharzon. "There's one other thing you should know. I think the drow released Myrkyssa Jelan, too."

Tharzon sat up straight. "The Warlord herself? No!"

"I see that you remember her as fondly as I do," said Jack. "I actually saw her down in the mythal-plaza, which is no longer under a lake, by the way. She emerged from the mythal as a very lifelike statue, and still managed to scare me half to death in that condition." He grinned crookedly. "Apparently she didn't stay that way for long, and the drow made the mistake of trying to enslave her. She cut her way out of Chûmavhraele and vanished into the Underdark."

The dwarf shook his head. "If Myrkyssa Jelan is at liberty again, trouble's sure to follow. I wouldn't be surprised …" Tharzon's voice trailed away, and his eyes took on a thoughtful expression. "Hmmph. I wonder? Is it possible?"

"Is what possible, friend Tharzon?"

"A new gang moved into the Skymbles a couple of tendays ago. They call themselves the Moon Daggers, and they've already put a

couple of local street gangs in their place. I've heard that the Moon Daggers aren't just guttersnipes and street rats; skilled adventurers run the gang, with a dark-haired swordswoman at their head. Do you think it's the Warlord?"

"I deem it unlikely. Street gangs come and go, and for that matter so do adventurers. All of Jelan's plots and designs are a hundred years out of date; even she couldn't easily recover from such a setback." Jack considered the question again, and decided that he was well satisfied with that answer. He winked at Seila. "Now on to more important matters: I promised you three days ago that I'd tell you the tale of the Guilder's Vault. Well, here sits one of my comrades in that harrowing adventure, and between the two of us I think we can do it justice.

"The tale begins in the disorderly library of a disreputable old sot of a sage by the name of Ontrodes, whose counsel I'd sought on the matter of a missing arcane tome known as the Sarkonagael …"



The telling of the story of the Guilder's Vault took up the rest of the morning. Jack counted it as time well spent, because Seila was completely enthralled by the story, all the more so because old Tharzon was able to reinforce the telling of the tale with his own recollections. After that, Jack and Tharzon traded news of old comrades for a little longer—most of whom, as one might expect, were long since dead—until Jack finally held up his hand. "I could spend the rest of the day talking with you, friend Tharzon, but I've a lot of city still to see, and it would be a pity to bore my lovely companion, here. I promise that I will return soon to resume our conversation."

"Fair enough," Tharzon replied. He snorted in bemusement, and shook his head. "Jack Ravenwild, here under my beams again. Who could have thought it?"

With another round of handclasps, Jack and Seila said their goodbyes and returned to the sunny streets outside. They climbed back into the carriage, and Seila leaned close to Jack. "He seems a

very pleasant fellow," she remarked. "And what stories, too. I think you were not as much of a gentleman back in those days, Jack."

"Rather like a good brandy, Tharzon's mellowed with age," Jack replied. "He was a very fierce fellow a century ago, and in fact once swore a blood oath to hack me to pieces if he ever saw me again. Fortunately, that little misunderstanding was cleared up! But I never would have thought him to be so sentimental."

"Where to now?"

Jack considered the question for a moment. He'd hoped that Tharzon might be able to shed some light on *why* he'd been encysted in the wild mythal, but it seemed that his disappearance had been as much a mystery to his friends as it was to himself. He would have to think of some other way to pursue that inquiry, he supposed. "Hmm … well, I can't think of any other old friends to look up unless we visit the cemetery. Let's just have a turn around the city and see what we see. I used to have a house over in Mortonbrace, and I sometimes made do with a little loft in Burnt Gables and a cottage on the Ladyrock." Jack's eye fell on a counting house, and another thought struck him. "And I would dearly like to visit Wyrmhoard House, if they are still around. My deposits have had a hundred years to grow; I am frankly curious as to the state of my accounts."

"To Mortonbrace, Hartle," Seila said to their driver. "But take your time, there's no hurry."

"As you wish, my lady," the driver replied. He gave the reins a shake and clucked at the horse, and the carriage rolled away from the Smoke Wyrm. They drove east on Vespers Way until they reached Moorland Ride, where they turned south and passed through the neighborhoods of Sixstar, Tentowers, and Swordspoint. Jack engaged himself wholly in the game of trying to spot which buildings remained the same and which had changed, then comparing the current occupants or business to the ones he remembered from his time. Many of the fine townhouses and manors in the noble neighborhoods still belonged to the same families, as one might expect, but most of the businesses were strange to him.

In Swordspoint they turned east on Raven Way, and crossed the small bridge over DeVillars Creek into the neighborhood of Mortonbrace. In Jack's day Mortonbrace had been something of an up and coming neighborhood, a place where many of the newly wealthy—including no small number of adventurers—had built fine new houses for themselves. Now, a hundred years later, it seemed that Mortonbrace had seen its peak and was growing old. Fine old manor houses now verged on dilapidation; some were broken out into a dozen or more apartments occupied by poor laborers and craftsmen, many of them from foreign lands. Jack discovered that the fashionable townhouse he'd bought for himself with his reward from the whole Myrkyssa Jelan affair was now occupied by several families of halflings.

"Well," he said with a sigh. It surprised him how much the sight of his house falling into disrepair and full of strangers darkened his mood; he'd never been one to care too much for the roof over his head, as long as he had one. "I suppose it would have too much to expect that the house would have stood vacant all this time."

"You might still have a claim on the place," Seila offered. "Or I'm sure you could buy it back if you wanted to."

Jack eyed the place dubiously. The roof now had a distinct sag to it, the porch slanted noticeably, and the siding was covered with salvaged planks and patches. He put on an air of indulgent good humor, and waved off the suggestion. "I think I'll let them keep it," he replied.

Next they visited Wyrmhoard House, the counting house where Jack had once kept the modest wealth he'd managed to save instead of spending on fine furnishings, splendid garb, and various dissipations and entertainments. There Jack learned that the five hundred or so gold crowns he'd once possessed had vanished into history, the account having been settled by someone claiming to have been acting as his legal heir about four years after he'd disappeared. "Duplicity! Despoliation!" Jack cried at the clerk assisting him. "How could you have simply given away the funds I entrusted to you?"

“Sir, you are referring to an event that occurred ninety-five years ago,” the clerk protested. He was a balding, middle-aged gnome who stood on a high riser behind the counter. The gnome pointed to the ancient, yellowed ledger in which the transaction was recorded. “It’s a wonder that we have this much of a record. This—” he paused to squint at the fading signature—“Morgath? Is that it? This Morgath apparently presented a court writ attesting to your demise, and another authorizing him to see to your estate. I can only surmise that my predecessor here at Wyrmhoard House saw no reason to doubt the veracity of the documents.”

“This is outrageous!” Jack protested. “I demand immediate redress.”

The clerk closed his dusty ledger. “You may seek such a ruling from the city magistrate, sir, but I will not hand you five hundred and thirty-five—”

“You neglect one hundred years of compound interest,” Jack interrupted.

“Five hundred thirty-five gold crowns or their compounded value, then. I cannot simply give you that sum. Do you have any proof that you are this person who lived a hundred years ago?”

“Of course I am me!”

“Then the magistrate should be able to establish that fact to my employer’s satisfaction. But I must reiterate that as far as Wyrmhoard House is concerned, the estate of Jack Ravenwild has already received all funds owed to it. I suggest you take up the matter with Master Morgath. Or, more likely, his descendants, if you can find them.” The clerk sniffed at Jack, tipped his cap to Seila, and scurried off with his ledger.

“If I can find them,” Jack muttered. “You have not heard the last from me on this matter!” he called after the retreating gnome.

Seila offered a small smile in sympathy. “I’m sure we can help you reestablish your identity,” she said. “My father has friends in the courts. Do you have any idea who this Morgath was?”

“No,” Jack said glumly. They left the counting house and climbed back into the carriage. Then Jack was struck by a memory … a fat, unctuous fellow from the thieves’ guild who always had a tall, bony

thug at his side. “Wait, yes. Morgath was a thief. The clever bastard must have forged the documents so that he could plunder my savings after I disappeared, Mask damn his black heart!”

“I am sure that you will not be left in want,” Seila pointed out. “My father will be grateful for my return, I can promise you that much.”

Jack’s interest piqued at the thought of a handsome reward, but he carefully put on an air of good cheer. “Nothing of the sort is necessary,” he claimed. “Come, let’s continue our tour. I am enjoying the outing greatly, that last little bit of unpleasantness excepted.”

They drove on along Stonekeep Way through the Skymbles, and turned westward again into Burnt Gables—no, Jack reminded himself, Sindlecross, as it was now called. There he found that the old warehouse he’d once lived above was simply gone, replaced by a large granary. Jack grimaced; behind the stove in his loft there’d been a hidden cache where he remembered leaving a sackful of gold coins and gemstones for a day when he might need them, but clearly the hidey-hole and its treasures were gone now. “So much for that,” he sighed. It seemed that he was much poorer than he’d hoped he would be. “Take us through Shadystreets, and then find us a ferry to the Ladyrock.”

“Very good, sir,” the coachmen replied. He drove them south on Sindle Street to Riverview, where Jack pointed out to Seila the spot where the leaning tower of the old sage Ontrodes had once stood. The sage’s house was long gone, of course; it had been on the verge of falling down in Jack’s day, so he would have been astonished to find it still there. Then they made their way down to the point of Crow’s End. There Jack and Seila hired a boatman to scull them two hundred yards over to the island in the middle of Raven’s Bluff’s harbor. A half-hour’s walk in the afternoon sunshine was sufficient to circle the Ladyrock; Jack’s old cottage was still standing but was abandoned, its roof mostly caved in and its walls overgrown with ivy and brambles.

Seila looked at it with distaste. “Did you really live here once?”

“It was in much better repair a hundred years ago. But it was a very modest abode, even then.” Jack looked it over and shook his head. “I suppose I could fix it up.”

“Why did you need so many residences, anyway?” Seila asked. “And, excuse me for saying so, weren’t they all rather modest for a gentleman of your station?”

“The Mortonbrace house was a perfectly genteel address when I bought it. As for the loft and the cottage, well, I think I have already told you that I was not without enemies. This cottage may have been little better than a hovel, but no one knew I owned it and I could retreat here for privacy when I found it prudent to drop out of sight.”

Seila gave Jack a long look. “Were you a criminal of some sort, Jack?”

“Absolutely not. You must remember, in my time the city fell under the rule of corrupt merchants and nobles who subverted our civic institutions. Why, the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan insinuated herself into the office of Lady Mayor by adopting an alias. When a city is ruled by malefactors, then patriots become outlaws.”

“I’ve heard the story of Myrkyssa Jelan before, but never the rest about corruption in the merchant houses and nobility.”

“Well, of course not. Powerful people were very embarrassed by the events of that time. I have no doubt that over time they worked very hard to whitewash the civic records.” Jack noted the concerned frown on Seila’s face, and quickly added, “The Norwoods were, of course, above reproach. Your family was one of the noble houses who worked to set matters right.”

“That is good to hear,” Seila replied, a look of relief on her face. “I was afraid that my ancestors might have been on the wrong side of that. So where would you like to go now?”

Jack glanced up at the sun, beginning to lower toward the west. “It’s getting late in the afternoon. I propose that we return to Norwood Manor.”

“I’m ready to go home,” Seila agreed.

They returned to the Ladyrock’s landing and hired another boat to take them back over to Crow’s End, where the carriage waited. Jack

busied himself with studying the passers-by in the streets as they drove back to Mortonbrace. If anything, Raven's Bluff seemed even more cosmopolitan than it had been a hundred years before. Sprinkled among the teeming crowds of humans he saw sturdy dwarves, dapper halflings, graceful elves of several kindreds, and people of kindreds he'd never even imagined before. As interesting as that seemed to him, none of the city folk seemed to take any notice of the nonhumans among them; clearly they were a routine sight in Raven's Bluff.

An hour's drive carried them through the city's northern gate and out along the Tantras Road again. The carriage returned to Norwood Manor as the shadows stretched out long black fingers across the lawn and the evening chill gathered close. Seila shivered, and Jack took the liberty of putting his arm around her shoulders and inviting her to snuggle closely beside him. She looked up at him with her enchanting green eyes before leaning her head against his shoulder.

"Not everything is misery and toil in this age, Jack," Seila said. "What do you think of the Year of the Ageless One now?"

"It shows more promise than I had first thought," Jack admitted. "Much has changed, and not all for the better. But I could become used to it, I think."

Seila chuckled softly to herself. "Do you think that you might be the Ageless One named by this year? Perhaps old Augathra caught some glimpse of your predicament when he wrote out his Roll of Years."

"I doubt very much that my troubles and travails inspired a half-mad seer who lived a thousand years ago to add one more cryptic euphemism to his great prophecy. As much as it pains me to say it, I am not that important."

"Well, I, for one, am glad that you found your way to this day," Seila replied. She reached up to turn Jack's face toward hers and kissed him soundly. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the soft delight of her lips as the horse's harness jingled and the wheels clattered over the cobblestones of the manor drive. Then, all too

soon, the carriage rocked gently to a halt by the manor steps, and Seila drew away. “Thank you for saving me,” she said.

For a moment Jack couldn’t find any words at all. Then he grinned and said, “I don’t suppose you could go find some new predicament for yourself? I would dearly love to rescue you again if that’s the reward for my efforts.”

She laughed, and clambered out of the carriage without a reply. Jack stared after her for a moment, admiring her fine curves and the silken sheen of her dark hair. “I believe she’s growing fond of me,” he murmured to himself. He might be absolutely destitute in this new day and age, but Seila Norwood very definitely was not, and that meant that this was no time to become soft in the head over a fetching figure and eyes as green as springtime, he told himself firmly. “Keep your wits about you, Jack. This is an opportunity not to be missed.”

With a broad smile, he leaped down from the carriage and followed Seila inside.



The next day, Seila’s father returned from Tantras.

Jack learned that the Lord Norwood was home when he ventured downstairs after sleeping away the better part of the morning. He found Seila having a late breakfast with her mother Idril in a small dining room that overlooked the manor’s gardens. A handsome, middle-aged nobleman sat between them, wearing a dark blue waistcoat and a large gold chain around his neck.

The fellow looked up as Jack entered, and beamed. “Ah, this must be our guest,” he said.

“Jack, allow me to introduce my father, Lord Marden Norwood,” said Seila. “Father, this is the Landsgrave Jaer Kell Wildhame of the Vilhon Reach, my only friend during those awful months of captivity, and ultimately the author of my escape.”

The silver-haired lord rose from the table and stepped forward to grasp Jack’s hand firmly. “My Lord Wildhame, I am forever in your debt,” he said. “Seila is the delight of my heart, and the hope of my

house. By bringing her away from those accursed drow, you have given me cause to live once again."

Jack returned his handclasp. "It was my great honor to have been of some small service to your lovely daughter, my Lord Norwood," he said. "Allow me to thank you for the hospitality of your home over the last few days. The circumstances of my arrival in this new day left me with nothing more than the shirt on my back, and trust me, that wasn't worth keeping."

"Think nothing of it," Norwood replied. "The least we could do, really. Seila told me of your extraordinary story this morning. I cannot imagine what you must make of all this, my Lord Wildhame."

"Please, my lord—Wildhame or just Jack. My father is, or I suppose I must now say was, Lord Wildhame."

"Of course, Jack, of course. And you should call me Marden. I believe you've earned that familiarity." The elder Norwood pumped Jack's hand again, and turned to Seila. "My dear, if you'll permit me, I would like to steal your Jack away for a short while. I have some things I'd like to speak with him about."

Seila gave her father a heart-melting pout, but her eyes laughed the whole while. "I suppose," she said. "Do be kind to him, Da. Good luck to you, Jack."

Lord Norwood steered Jack over to a large study that adjoined the dining room. It was finished in rich southern hardwoods and furnished in fine leather. Jack saw Seila glance once after them before the old lord drew the door shut behind him. He decided that utter confidence was called for; there was no Wildhame estate, of course, and in fact there never had been any such place, but as far as Marden Norwood knew, he was exactly what he said he was. After all, he reminded himself, nobility is simply a rather exclusive club that a few very ordinary individuals happen to belong to, thanks to nothing more than the accident of birth.

He faced Marden Norwood squarely, and asked, "How may I help you, Lord Marden?"

"Before we speak of anything else, there is something I must do," the nobleman replied. "I have instructed Dralden Horthlaer of

Horthlaer House on Manycoins Way to make available to you a credit line of five thousand gold crowns. Draw on it for anything you wish; the money is yours. I cannot set a value on what you have done for my family, but at least I can make sure that you will not be in want so long as it lies in my power to express my gratitude in some small way."

Jack's eyes widened, and he choked back on a whoop of glee. Instead he gathered his dignity about him like any properly raised lordling, and bowed. "My lord, you are too generous," he made himself say. "I did not bring Seila out of Tower Chûmavhraele in expectation of any reward."

"I do not mean to imply that you did, Jack. But it would please me if you would consent to accept something as a token of my esteem. And of course you will be the guest of honor at a grand party we are throwing next tenday in celebration of Seila's rescue."

"If it would please you—" it certainly pleased Jack quite well, although he tried to strike the exact right note of accepting a gift in the spirit in which it was intended rather than exulting in his newfound fortune—"then, of course, I shall be happy to accept." He made a small gesture of self-deprecation, and added, "In all honesty, I may very well be destitute. From what I have heard there is some doubt about whether my family's lands even survive today."

"Ah, yes, Seila mentioned that you hailed from the Vilhon Reach. A landsgravate is more or less the equivalent of a barony, is it not?"

"A small one," Jack answered. "I hope that I shall see Wildhame again someday, but it seems like that is lost to me along with all the years I've missed."

"When you are ready to go in search of Wildhame, Jack, let me know. I will assist you." Norwood reached out to set a hand on Jack's shoulder, and gave him a small smile. "Now, there is something else I wanted to speak to you about. Seila mentioned to me that you'd actually spoken to the drow queen below Sarbreen. I want to know everything you can tell me about her."

"Ah, I see. You intend to exact some retribution against the drow for the suffering Seila endured. I heartily approve."

“Well, yes, I won’t deny that thought had crossed my mind, but that is a personal matter. No, what I am hoping you can provide me now is information that might help me in a more official capacity.” Norwood paced over to the window, gazing out over the gardens outside. “I am a man of high rank here in Raven’s Bluff—and in the whole realm of Vesperin, to be honest—and I bear certain responsibilities to look after the homeland that has treated my family so well. As far as I can tell, the drow have been under our city for fifty years or more, and they’ve never been more than a nuisance in all that time. Oh, once in a great while a merchant might go missing on the road to Tantras, or an isolated farmstead might be raided. But it was really no worse than the sort of thing common outlaws might do. A tragedy for those affected, but nothing deserving of any determined response on our part.

“But in the last year or so, that has changed. The drow raiders are growing bolder each day. Hundreds of people have been killed or carried off into slavery in that terrible gloomy underworld of theirs. I was quite concerned already when Seila’s caravan was attacked and she was taken away. Her abduction was the final outrage that brought the issue into perfect clarity for me: We are at war with the drow, and no one in this city but me and a few others recognize that unpleasant fact.” The lord looked over his shoulder. “So, Jack—who is my enemy? What manner of woman is she? And how can I strike back at her?”

Jack assumed a gravely thoughtful expression, reaching up to tug at his goatee with his hand. Here at least was an easy way to impress Seila’s father with his insight and resolve. “Your foe is the marquise, not queen, Dresimil Chûmavh,” he said. “Her family seat is Tower Chûmavhraele, a subterranean castle that lies about half a mile below the city’s northern wall. I could not say for certain when she built the place, but it wasn’t there a hundred years ago when I ventured into that same part of the Underdark.”

“Did you speak with her?”

“Yes, on two occasions,” Jack answered. “She is quite beautiful, highly intelligent, and even a little charming in her own way. When

she isn't wondering aloud about whether to have one fed to a giant solifugid, that is."

"A what?"

"Hopefully, the question is now moot. To continue, I also met Dresimil's brothers, Jaeren and Jezzryd. They are twins, and both appear to be very competent sorcerers." He paused, recollecting his conversations with the drow. "They are, of course, exquisitely wicked, just as the stories say. Dresimil enjoyed toying with me. I felt very much like a mouse in the claws of a cat that had a mind to play with its food. But I must also say that I was struck by their keen curiosity and appreciation for ironic circumstances. Dresimil and her brothers are every bit as cruel and decadent as I might have expected, but it's an elegant cruelty and a sophisticated decadence. It would be a mistake to think of them as savages. Well, the Chûmavhs, anyway. The lower-ranking drow were not quite so refined."

"Do you have any idea why they have suddenly become so hostile to us?" Norwood asked.

"They seemed to have a desperate need for laborers," Jack replied. "The drow are engaged in some grand projects below our feet, Lord Marden. They drained the great subterranean lake beneath Sarbreen to expose the ruins of an ancient dark elf city and its forgotten mythal stone, and they're engaged in repairing its enchantments."

"Seila said you had been imprisoned in an old drow mythal," Norwood remarked. "It seems hard to believe that such a thing has been under our feet all this time."

"Oh, yes," Jack answered. "Remind me, and I'll tell you quite a story about my first encounter with the wild mythal sometime. Anyway, the drow were employing hundreds of surface-slaves along with goblins, orcs, bugbears, and all sorts of other creatures to do their work for them. And the dark elves paid in good gold for slavers—such as that unpleasant fellow, Fetterfist—to bring new wares down to the Underdark to keep up their labor force."

"Fetterfist has a date with the gallows if I ever get my hands on him," Norwood said, a dark look on his face. "I suspected his

involvement from the very first when Seila's caravan was attacked; no other slaver would have been so bold."

"I am surprised that such a notorious slaver can operate with impunity in and around the city. Is the city watch incompetent?"

"Fetterfist hides his identity behind a mask; no one knows who he is. And I would not be surprised if he has friends in the city's administration who warn him when the watch is closing in." The lord considered Jack's words for a long time, his brow furrowed in thought. Finally he spoke again, changing the subject. "How is it that, out of the hundreds of captives the drow are holding in the Underdark, you chose to rescue Seila?"

Jack gave a nervous shrug. "My fellow paddock-slaves were orcs, goblins, and such. Seila was the only other human I knew. What sort of gentleman would I be if I fled, and left her to her fate? I had to at least try to secure her freedom as well as my own."

Marden Norwood nodded. "Of course, quite right," he replied. He motioned with his arm toward the study door. "I've put you through it enough for one morning, I think. I'd like to speak with you again, perhaps have you describe the drow castle and its surroundings for our knights and mages. But now I believe that I've kept you from your breakfast long enough, and you look like you could stand a few more good meals. Shall we?"

"Thank you, Lord Marden. I am hungry." Jack followed Lord Norwood to the study door. Seila's father didn't seem like such a bad fellow after all, he decided. He'd have to give some thought to the best way to draw down that line of credit and encourage Norwood to extend more, but he was certain he could finesse the old lord when the time came.

Norwood paused at the study door. "Oh, and one more thing," he said. "Because it may be some time before you can establish what, if anything, remains of your family's holdings and fortune after so many years, I would like to offer you the use of Maldridge in Tentowers, a fine house in the city. I expect that you will want to set up in a place of your own rather than making do in our guest room. The house is yours for as long as you wish; we have no real need for it, since Blackyews is a few doors down."

Jack repressed a grimace. Old Norwood had maneuvered him rather neatly there; he hadn't exactly thrown Jack out, but Maldridge wasn't where Jack wanted to be—he would rather have stayed right in Norwood Manor, just a few doors down from Seila. In fact, now that he thought on it, that might have been *exactly* the reason Marden Norwood had found an empty house miles away in the city for him. Jack could hardly decline the offer without seeming ungrateful or making it very plain that he wanted to stay closer to Seila than Norwood might have liked. "Again, my lord, you are too generous," he replied. "I remember Maldridge; it is a very fine house indeed."

The lord offered a small shrug. "If, as seems likely, you are the last of the Wildhames, then helping you to establish yourself here in Raven's Bluff is the least I can do. Think of it as a temporary arrangement if you like, just until you are on your feet again, however long that takes. Perhaps tomorrow we can drive into town and have a look at the place."

"Excellent," Jack replied with feigned enthusiasm. "I look forward to it, Marden."

"That's a good fellow." Norwood beamed brightly again, and clapped Jack on the shoulder. "Come on, let's find you that breakfast."

CHAPTER SIX

The fine old house of Maldridge stood on MacIntyre Path, just between Falyern Way and Turnhelm Street. The cornerposts featured weathered statues of stern knights; a short flight of stone steps led up to a grand front door of black zalantar-wood from the far south, carved in a sylvan scene of dancing nymphs. More of the expensive hardwood was used lavishly to trim and furnish the interior, which included a library, a study, a large dining room whose fine parquet had no doubt seen much use as a dance floor, kitchens, a wine cellar, and upstairs half a dozen comfortable bedchambers. Behind the manor there was a small walled garden with a fountain and a carriage-house. It even came with a small staff of its own: cook, valet, gardener, and a couple of rather matronly maids. The Norwoods were in the habit of keeping the place ready for use by noble relations, allied families from other lands, or other honored guests who found reason to spend a season or two in Raven's Bluff; all in all, it was easily five times as much house as Jack needed.

Marden Norwood insisted that Maldridge was available for Jack's use immediately, and no matter how much Jack demurred, he couldn't avoid accepting the keys the same afternoon they visited the place. Seila lingered just long enough to give him a chaste little peck on the cheek under her father's watchful eye, and then the Norwoods left Jack to "settle in and be at home," as the old lord put it. Jack spent a rather restless night in the grand master suite, devising various schemes by which he might entice Seila to visit him without her father in tow, and finally fell asleep well after midnight.

When he rose the next morning, he found his cook waiting to prepare his breakfast and a selection of the city's various handbills arranged neatly by his place at the table. "I might become used to this," he said. "Eggs and bacon, my good fellow! And perhaps some Zakharan coffee, if we have anything like that in the house."

As soon as he finished, his valet—a thin, balding fellow so short that Jack almost wondered if he were part halfling—appeared carrying a silver tray with a stack of envelopes. “This morning’s correspondence, my lord,” he said.

“Correspondence?” Jack replied. “Who would be writing me already?”

The valet inclined his head. “Mostly invitations to various social functions, and calling cards from some of the neighbors,” he explained. “Many of the well-to-do folk of the city are anxious to meet you, my lord.”

Jack frowned in puzzlement, wondering why, and then the answer came to him. “Ah, of course. Word’s got out that Lord Norwood considers himself in my debt. People are seeking to cultivate his favor through me.”

The valet gave a small shrug. “It’s not uncommon in your circles, my lord.”

“Hmm. Well, that might not be such a bad thing. I am anxious to make new friends in turn.” Jack peeked at the stack of cards and envelopes, recognizing some family names and utterly clueless about others. Clearly, he had some studying up to do. He glanced back to the valet. “What did you say your name was, my good man?”

“I am Edelmon, my lord.”

“ ‘Sir’ or ‘Master Jack’ will suffice, Edelmon. The first order of business will be a new wardrobe. Send for a good tailor and see if we can’t arrange to have some measurements taken and a look at some samples this afternoon. My tastes are refined, my standards high.”

“Very good, sir,” Edelmon replied. “I shall see to it.”

“Accept all but the most unseemly or inconvenient invitations; I am happy to make the rounds. Also, see if you can’t find an engraver or limner to draw up my own stationery with the Wildhame arms so that we can return our own calling cards and invitations as soon as possible.”

“Where might I find an example of the Wildhame arms, sir?”

“None exist in the current day. I will provide more specific instructions when it’s time for our engraver to begin work. Next order of business: I will write out a draft for one thousand gold crowns against the line of credit established for me at Horthlaer House. Have them bring over a small strongbox or coffer, suitably escorted.”

“That is a considerable sum, sir.”

“I will take good care of it, I assure you, but I feel the need to have some coin in my purse for sundry and minor expenses that may come up in the next few months.” Jack took a sip of his coffee, thinking for a moment. He’d have to come up with something for his house arms; perhaps something with a noble-looking stag would seem appropriate for Wildhame. What else was there to do? What he really wanted was to find an excuse to call on Seila as soon as possible, but that would have to be handled delicately. In a day or two he might be able to drive out to Norwood Manor by way of thanking Marden in person for the fine house, but the last thing he wanted to do was to appear desperate to attach himself to the Norwood household … or to stay out of sight so long that Seila forgot to think about him. “A letter,” he said to himself. “A friendly note with just the right touch of amorous overtones, a little audacious but not overbearing or saccharine.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Simply speaking to myself, Edelmon. Some paper and a quill, if you please. I’ve a note to compose.”

The valet bowed and withdrew, returning shortly with a stack of good linen paper, a quill, and an inkpot. Jack spent the next half-hour carefully composing a small thank you note to Seila, expressing his delight with the hospitality of the Norwoods and noting how much he looked forward to their next meeting. Then, with no easy way to further ingratiate himself with Seila or her father and most of the morning still ahead, he sat back to consider what other interests deserved his attention.

“I have always been ardent in pursuit of opportunity,” he mused, “but now I find myself virtually ignorant of what opportunities might be available in this day and age. What should I do with

myself while my designs upon Seila ripen?" Idly he picked up the handbills and leafed through them. The first broadsheet led with a lurid tale of abductions in the alleyways of Mortonbrace, laying the blame at slavers scouring the city for drunk, homeless, or simply unfortunate souls to sell into slavery. The second handbill was occupied with an investigation of bribery and racketeering among the watch officers of the Pumpside neighborhood; the next reported on the deliberations of the Council of Lords, lamenting their inability to agree to a plan designed to combat the criminal influences in the city and making carefully veiled insinuations to the effect that some councilors might have an interest in keeping things in their current state. It seemed that he had returned to Raven's Bluff in an age of unusual civic corruption; Jack smiled as he considered the bountiful opportunities that implied.

He settled down to read the handbills more thoroughly. On the back of the first bill, an item caught his eye: REWARD OFFERED FOR RECOVERY OF MISSING TOME. He read further, studying the article. "Anonymous patron offers five thousand gold crowns to any person who finds the spellbook known as the Sarkonagael, rumored to be lost in the depths of Sarbreen … the Sarkonagael? By Mask's shadowed sword, is that old grimoire still about?" Jack knew that book very well. Long ago the lovely and mysterious Elana had commissioned him to find the Sarkonagael, which had led him to the library of the infamous necromancer Iphegor the Black, from whence he'd stolen the book. On delivering the book to the mysterious Elana he'd discovered that she was none other than the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan. The mage or mages who served her had used the Sarkonagael's spells to cause no end of trouble during her attempt to seize power in the city. As far as Jack recalled, the Ministry of Art had confiscated the sinister spellbook for safekeeping after Jelan's defeat … but it seemed that it was missing again, and someone very badly wanted it found.

"Now that is interesting," he murmured. Once upon a time he had been very good at unraveling riddles of that sort, and even if he didn't know where to start in the Raven's Bluff of today, the

exercise might help introduce him to the sorts of useful, if shady, people he used to know throughout the city. And who could say that he was at any disadvantage compared to a contemporary investigator? He would, after all, embark on the process with no preconceptions, armed with a mental flexibility few others could match. He had personal experience of the Sarkonagael, which any other seekers in the current day likely lacked. The reward was substantial enough to double his fortune at a stroke if he succeeded … or, if he decided the person seeking the book shouldn't have it, he could curry favor with the city's authorities and rulers by securing it for them. "Either way I would continue to burnish my fortunes in this current day," he concluded.

He read further, noting that the reward was offered through the counting house of Horthlaer—doubtless the interested party wished to publish his or her interest in the ancient book while protecting their anonymity—and made a note to inquire at Horthlaer's about when the reward had been offered and who was behind it. After all, it was more than a little coincidental that a book that had gone missing back in his own day had resurfaced as a topic of interest at the very same moment in history that he himself had returned to. Then he pushed himself back from his breakfast table, pausing to dab at his mouth with his napkin. "Very interesting, indeed," he reflected. He would have to look into the Sarkonagael business soon … but for now, he had business at the High House of Magic. Some wizard of a hundred years past had done him a great disservice, and someone from the Wizards' Guild might very well know the identity of his forgotten nemesis.

He threw on the best of his borrowed Norwood cloaks, chose a jaunty cap, and informed Edelmon that he would return in a couple of hours. Then he ventured out into the streets of Tentowers. It was overcast and blustery, much more typical for springtime in Raven's Bluff than the fine weather of the previous day, and Jack shivered as the wind bit through his clothes. Fortunately, the High House of Magic was only two blocks south of Maldridge on MacIntyre. A few minutes' dignified stroll brought him to the foot of a small, spired castle that stood in the middle of the fine houses and well-heeled

shops. Jack had always thought the headquarters of the Wizards' Guild was rather pretentious, and he was not surprised to see that a hundred years hadn't moderated the tastes of its occupants in the least.

He climbed the steps to the tower door and gave it a firm knock. A moment later the door opened, and an officious-looking chamberlain—a tiefling, to judge by his horns and tail—answered. "Yes?" he said in a sepulchral voice.

"Good morning!" said Jack. "I am a wizard of some skill, and I might be interested in joining this arcane fellowship if a tour of the premises and introduction to the staff convinces me that it would be worth my while."

The tiefling bowed and showed Jack inside to the dark-paneled foyer without another word. Seven busts of stern-looking mages stood in small alcoves, seeming to study Jack with disapproval. He gave them a casual glance; he was not terribly interested in the Guild's long-deceased assortment of notables and benefactors. But the tiefling chamberlain paused in the middle of the foyer and addressed the collected statuary. "An applicant for membership, honored archmages," he intoned.

"A peculiar tradition," Jack observed. "Still, far be it from me to criticize your quaint superstitions."

The marble busts stared blankly ahead, and Jack began to form the unpleasant suspicion that he was indeed under some form of examination. The last time he had ventured into the High House of Magic to join the Guild, there had been no such procedure, but of course that had been more than a hundred years ago. He looked more closely at the stone faces, and realized that he recognized a couple of them. Over on the left end stood the lean, bearded visage of Alcides van Tighe, archmage of the guild in Jack's day, and two busts to the right was a round-faced mage with a thin, drooping mustache and a bored expression—the wizard Meritheus, who'd been a minor functionary in the guild when Jack knew him. Apparently the fellow had succeeded in climbing through the ranks in the decades after Jack's imprisonment.

Jack grew a little restless as the tiefling waited in silence, and he began to fidget with the buttons on his coat. “Exactly how long will we continue to pay our respects?” he whispered to the chamberlain.

“This sorcerer is known to me,” the bust of Meritheus suddenly said. Its stone visage came to life, eyes blinking and lips moving as it spoke. “Bid welcome to the Dread Delgath, master of time and space, an affiliate member since the Year of Wild Magic. His dues are in arrears by one hundred and six years. And I am reminded that I have a message for Master Silverlocke; please notify him at once.” The statue adopted a sour expression as it regarded Jack.

The tiefling remained expressionless as he looked down at Jack. “It seems that you are a member already, Master Delgath.”

Jack stared at the bust for a long moment before answering. “The Dread Delgath bestrides the years as lesser mages might pace across a room. If I have no recollection of joining your guild, it is simply because I have not yet done so. Clearly I will travel to the Year of Wild Magic at some point in my personal future, and join your fellowship at that time.” That struck him as eminently plausible for a master of time and space, and he folded his arms across his chest in a pose of unshakeable confidence. “For that reason the matter of one hundred and six years of dues is not relevant. My dues must be calculated on the basis of my personal experience, not the simple turning of years that signify nothing to the Dread Delgath. Now, shall we continue inside? I have important business to attend in this strange and marvelous year.”

The tiefling looked again at the bust of Meritheus, then frowned at Jack. “Do you know the Master Silverlocke of whom the archmage spoke?”

The name was dimly familiar to Jack; it took him a moment to place it. Silverlocke had been one of the old guild officers back in his proper day, but Jack didn’t recall any dealings with the fellow. Most likely Master Silverlocke was in charge of woefully dated membership rolls or collecting long-owed dues or some such thing, and because he’d just suggested to the chamberlain that he had no memory of joining the guild in the past, he decided not to admit otherwise. “I am afraid I know none of your guild members.

Becoming acquainted with your fellowship was indeed the purpose of my visit."

The chamberlain considered Jack's reply, then shook his head. "I am uncertain how to proceed," he admitted. "I do not know any Master Silverlocke. I cannot enroll you again, nor can I excuse the unpaid dues. Please wait here while I summon Initiate Berreth."

"As you wish," Jack replied magnanimously. The tiefling departed through a doorway leading deeper into the tower, leaving Jack alone with the marble busts. He wondered if they preserved any of the memories of their originals or if they were instead enchanted to simply recognize members and thus inform the chamberlain about who should be granted admittance to the tower. He occupied himself with trying to perfectly mimic their expressions as the doorman fetched whomever he'd gone to fetch. After a short time, a rather short and studious-looking woman with mousy brown hair and thick spectacles bustled into the room.

"Master Delgath," she said with a small frown. "The chamberlain tells me that you are a lapsed member?"

Jack decided on the spot to overpower the bookish mage with pure charm. "Why, hello," he answered with a wide smile. "I suppose that to your records I might seem to be a century in arrears, but things are not as simple as they appear. During my travels I have skipped across the years like a pebble hurled across the surface of a pond. I am, however, now likely to remain in this era for some time, and may be interested in resuming my membership. Of course I would like to look around before making up my mind. I am not a hasty man, oh, no."

Berreth's frown deepened. "Chamberlain Marzam said that you had not actually yet joined the guild in your own timeline—"

"I have joined, and I have not joined. Both are equally true; traveling through time engenders many paradoxes. The chamberlain undoubtedly failed to comprehend this."

"Can you offer some additional proof of your unusual claims?"

"That will prove difficult. I could hop back to yesterday and meet you then, but of course that would become our first meeting, and this encounter would not take place; you would have no memory of

this discussion. Or I might time-stride to tomorrow and return, but who's to say that I didn't just teleport off and hide for twenty-four hours to give the appearance of having leaped a day ahead?" Jack shook his head solemnly. "Your excellent archmages have already identified me as one and the same with a person who belonged to the guild one hundred and six years ago, and you can see that I am about thirty years of age and perfectly human. Is that not proof enough?"

Berreth's brow knitted as she listened closely to Jack. "Perhaps it would be easiest if I just marked you down as a lapsed member," she said.

"Please proceed in whatever manner is most convenient for you."

The studious mage drew a small ledger from her sleeve and scribbled furiously in it. "That was Delgath?" she asked.

"The Dread Delgath," Jack corrected her.

"And what can we do for you today, Dread Delgath?"

"I would like to tour the premises, meet the charming staff, and determine whether to renew my membership. You must remember, my experience of the Guild's facilities—which may not have actually happened yet—is a hundred years out of date."

"Very well." Berreth seemed more than a little relieved to close her ledger and turn her attention to a more manageable task than recording the comings and goings of the Dread Delgath. "Please, follow me."

Jack followed the mage as she led him on a tour of the High House. She provided perfunctory explanations as they wandered through laboratories, lecture halls, scriptoriums, rooms full of curios and exhibits, meeting chambers, and vaults. Jack feigned great interest in everything he saw, and went out of his way to compliment Berreth on the evident depth and variety of her learning. It was difficult to tell if his efforts were bearing fruit, since his solicitude seemed to puzzle her more than anything else; apparently she was not accustomed to being the recipient of such attentions. At one point they paused in a large library, filled with tall bookshelves that were crowded with strange and curious tomes.

“I don’t suppose you have a book known as the Sarkonagael somewhere in your collection?” Jack asked.

Berreth gave him a stern look. “Oh, you’re one of *those*, are you?”

“One of those?” Jack repeated.

“For three days now the High House has been besieged by fortune hunters who believe that first, any missing spellbook must naturally be in the Wizards’ Guild, and second, we do not read the daily handbills and haven’t noticed the reward offered for the book.”

“Please forgive me,” Jack replied. “I do not demean your perspicacity. I simply believe that one should eliminate the obvious possibilities before proceeding to more obscure solutions. It is my rigorous mental discipline that leads me to ask.”

“Well, you may eliminate the High House’s library. No Guild member knows the book or has any idea why it might be so important to whatever party is offering the reward through Horthlaer’s.”

Jack offered a small smile; here was a chance to bait a hook and see what came of it. “Ah, but in that you may be mistaken, dear Berreth. In a past that may or may not come to be, I encountered the Sarkonagael in the library of the necromancer Iphegor.”

The mage peered at him through her thick spectacles. “Indeed? Can you tell us anything about its contents? What is it? Who would want it?”

Jack paused, thinking it over. Any information he shared might help the Guild to recover its lost book, and provide him at least a partial claim on the reward … but he could also use the opportunity to sow disinformation, and perhaps throw the investigators off the track so that he could recover the book—and its substantial reward—himself. “I propose a deal,” he said. “I will tell you what I know about the Sarkonagael, if you will help me find out what became of several prominent wizards I knew back in my previous visit with the guild. I am very curious about their respective fates.”

Initiate Berreth gave him a skeptical look, perhaps wondering if he really knew anything about the Sarkonagael, but she nodded. “The library contains records of prominent wizards and their activities. I think I might be able to help you.”

“Excellent,” Jack replied. “In that event, I will tell you that the book was subtitled *Secrets of the Shadewrights*, and was a lengthy dissertation on shadow magic. It held a particularly dangerous spell that allowed an unscrupulous wizard to create a simulacrum or copy of somebody else by crafting it from the stuff of shadow. And the tome once belonged to the necromancer known as Iphegor the Black.” All that was true enough, of course. “As to its appearance, it was bound in smoky gray dragon leather, and its pages were made of a strange sort of black vellum. The writing was in a silver ink that could only be read by the light of a magical shadow-lantern.” That was entirely fiction, made up on the spot to confuse any Guild efforts to locate the book by its physical appearance. If he was ever caught in the lie, he could always claim that the book must have been magically disguised when he saw it a hundred years ago.

Berreth pulled out her journal again and added more notes with her quill, scratching away at the yellowed parchment. “Fascinating,” she said. “The archmage and the deans will be very interested in this; you know more about this book than anyone else of this day, it seems.” She shut her book and tucked it back into her sleeve. “Now, let us see what we can find out about these old Guild members of yours.”



Jack spent the rest of the morning with Initiate Berreth, searching through the guild’s ancient records. He’d hoped that he might find some hint or suggestion to identify which of the powerful wizards of his acquaintance had imprisoned him in the wild mythal, but that hope proved ill-founded. The Guild records noted that Yu Wei, the Shou wizard who served Myrkyssa Jelan, was deceased as of the Year of Wild Magic, years before Jack’s imprisonment. That made perfect sense, of course; he’d seen Yu Wei struck down by Zandria’s spell of chain lightning in the final battle against the Warlord and her minions. Still, it was reassuring to know that Yu Wei did not somehow escape certain doom and return to vex him.

Zandria’s fate was more difficult to piece together, because she’d left Raven’s Bluff a year or so after Jack’s adventures with her.

Fortunately, the Guild was in the habit of hoarding news of notable wizards wherever they might be. During the Year of the Bent Blade, she was living quite comfortably in Elversult, having recovered some great treasure or another from Chondathan ruins in the area. In fact, it seemed that she had won herself a noble title for her efforts and was counted as one of the city's high councilors. "Zandria might have returned briefly to Raven's Bluff to visit some sinister scheme upon me," Jack mused, "but I simply don't believe she was that angry with me, especially if her circumstances in Elversult were condign."

"What did you do to earn this Zandria's anger?" Berreth asked.

"I solved an impossible riddle for her and helped her to win a legendary treasure, but she was difficult to please," Jack answered. "What of Iphegor the Black?"

Berreth consulted the appropriate tomes, and in half an hour more Jack had his answer. The story of Iphegor the Black, nightmare of rival sorcerers and plunderer of ancient lore, was quite peculiar. He vanished from the knowledge of the Wizard's Guild until the Year of the Black Blazon—a full six years after Jack's imprisonment—at which point he returned to Raven's Bluff at the head of an army of necromantic mice. He sent his tiny skeletal horde into the home of Marcus, Knight of the Hawk, capering and cackling with maniacal glee in the street outside as the undead creatures devoured the hapless knight in his bed. Then he vanished with the cry, "Thus ever to mouse-murderers!" and was never heard from again.

"What a strange fellow," Berreth said after reading the account. "Why should he care if this Marcus had killed a mouse?"

Jack grinned from ear to ear. Marcus had been the personal author of two severe beatings upon his person; he was not at all unhappy to discover that the Knight of the Hawk had met his end in an unexpected fashion. "The mouse in question was the beloved familiar of Iphegor the Black," he told Berreth. "Iphegor always blamed Marcus for the mouse's death, which was perhaps unfair, because I was more directly responsible. Well, the wheel of a cart had something to do with it, too. In any event, I can rest assured that Iphegor never learned what role I played in the whole

unfortunate affair, and he continued to blame Marcus. He had no reason to suspect my involvement, and therefore he was not responsible for what befell me."

While Jack pondered the question of what other wizard might have acted against him, he heard the distant chimes of the Temple of Holy Revelry announcing one bell after noon. Remembering that he might be expecting the attentions of a tailor at Maldridge, he excused himself to Initiate Berreth … but not until she'd exacted from him the fifty gold crowns to renew his affiliate membership in good standing. He cheerfully paid; it might prove useful to maintain good relations with the High House of Magic, and he might be able to trade other morsels of information about the people, places, and events of his time for additional favors.

He strolled back to Maldridge and found that Edelmon had obtained the services of the halfling tailor Grigor Silverstitch. Jack spent the better part of the afternoon with the fussy little fellow, giving thorough attention to every detail of his wardrobe, from boots (five pairs, in various styles and colors) to hats (four of those, including two jaunty caps and two wide-brimmed for inclement weather). Jack always considered himself a bold dresser, and he had a good eye for fashions; when Master Silverstitch departed, the tailor was beaming at the prospect of several hundred crowns' worth of business that would allow him to showcase his talents in a style that more conservative clients might shy away from.

Jack saw to the strongbox full of gold that had been delivered from his counting house, admiring the coins before locking up the strongbox in the most secure vault he could find in the house, and then he ventured out again to visit a couple of booksellers. He hoped against hope that someone had simply stolen the Sarkonagael from the person offering the reward to fence it, although it seemed unlikely other treasure-seekers would have overlooked something so obvious. The effort proved as fruitless as he expected, although he did meet some of the city's dealers in rare and ancient tomes—one never knew when those acquaintances might come in handy. Finally he returned home, where he enjoyed a fine dinner of roast beef accompanied by a dry Chessentan red.

After dinner, Jack enjoyed a glass of port by the fire and leafed through a recent travelogue he'd picked up during his foray to the booksellers' shops with the idea of acquainting himself with the changes in lands and cities wrought by the Spellplague. A discrete knock came at the study door, and the valet Edelmon entered. "I beg your pardon, sir," the valet said. "The staff has gone home for the evening. If you do not require anything else, I shall retire."

"Very good," Jack said. "But leave out this excellent port. I may have another glass."

"You have a lunchtime engagement with Lady Moonbrace and her family tomorrow. And in the evening there is a reception at the Raven's Bluff Playhouse to solicit patrons for the troupe."

"Should I become a patron?"

"It may prove advantageous, sir. Many well-connected people should be in attendance. A gift of perhaps two hundred crowns would be appropriate."

Jack winced a little. Marden Norwood's five thousand crowns might go faster than he would like if he kept spending at his current pace; all the more reason to expand his fortune at the first opportunity. "Very good," he said.

The doorbell chimed out in the front hall. "Ah. Are you still receiving visitors, sir?" Edelmon asked.

"It depends who's calling," Jack replied.

"I will see, sir," Edelmon bowed and left Jack in the study. He heard the front door open and a murmur of voices before the valet returned. "A young lady at the door requests a word with you, sir. She gave her name as Alanda; I asked her to wait in the foyer. Shall I show her in?"

Jack thought for a moment, trying to place the name. He'd met many people over the last few days in Norwood Manor. Perhaps it was a message from Seila? "No, I'll go speak to her," he said. "You may retire, Edelmon."

The valet bowed and withdrew, heading downstairs to his quarters by the kitchen. Jack took a moment to smooth his tunic. Then he opened the study's sliding door and stepped into the front hall,

already beginning a gracious bow to greet his guest before the words of welcome died in his mouth.

There, in his foyer, stood the Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan.

She wore a burgundy doublet over black tights and thigh-high boots of fine leather; her long, raven-dark hair was bound around her brow by a slender golden fillet, and her fine katana—the very sword with which she'd almost killed him once—rode at her hip in a sheath of lacquered wood. "A new standing instruction for the staff," Jack muttered to himself. "Henceforward I am to be advised if my visitors are armed."

The Warlord studied him carefully for a moment as he stood there, gaping at her, and then snorted to herself. "It really is you, as unlikely as that might seem," she said. "Hello, Jack. Have you missed me?"

Jack stared for a long time before he finally found his voice. "Elana," he said. "Why are you here?"

"I heard rumors that Seila Norwood had been rescued from captivity in Chûmavhraele by someone calling himself Jaer Kell Wildhame. I recognized your favorite alias, but I couldn't believe that the tale was true. So I decided to see for myself if you were indeed the Jack Ravenwild I knew." Jelan prowled closer, and she locked her eyes on Jack's. "As it turns out, Jack, you and I have unfinished business."

Then she drew her katana from its scabbard and leaped across the room at him.

Jack's feet refused to move for one terrible instant, as he saw his death gleaming in Jelan's hands. Then he managed to backpedal, slamming the sliding door shut just before her thrust would have skewered him. The chiseled point of the katana burst through the door's panel inches from his face, and hung there for a moment. Quick as an eyeblink, Jack reversed himself on the sliding door and yanked it open with all his might, pinning her sword in place against the opposite doorjamb. They stood together in the doorway for a moment, Jelan trying to withdraw her sword, Jack locking the sliding door in place with his foot.

“Elana,” he said, panting a little with the effort. “This is an unexpected pleasure. Or do you prefer Myrkyssa? I’m not really sure.”

“Elana will do,” she answered. Then she let go of her swordhilt and threw her left elbow into Jack’s ribs, shoving him out of the doorway. The instant Jack was out of the way, she freed her blade and came at him again, pursuing him into the study. Jack reeled back, gasping for breath from the blow to his side, but he had the presence of mind to kick a small ottoman across the gleaming, polished floorboards right into Jelan’s feet. It caught her in mid-stride, and with a muffled oath Jelan stumbled. That gave Jack enough time to cross the room and draw his rapier from the swordbelt hanging by the desk. He turned to confront her again, somewhat comforted by the weight of the steel in his hand. On the other hand, Jelan was very, very skilled with her blade, and probably more than a match for him.

“I don’t suppose you would be kind enough to explain why you are trying to kill me?” he asked, carefully sidling out of the corner to give himself room to maneuver.

“It has something to do with the fact that you interfered with designs of mine that were ten years in the making,” Jelan replied. “And in doing so, you left me entombed in stone for a hundred years. Everyone I care for has been dead for decades, Jack. It’s as if you murdered them all.”

“I had no way of knowing what would happen,” Jack protested. He started to say more, but Jelan resumed her attack. She darted across the room, her katana gleaming in lightning-swift slashes and cuts. Jack did his best to stand his ground, parrying and riposting with his rapier. Steel rang shrilly in the dusty old study. His point flew from one contact to the next, and he managed to barely deflect the Warlord’s attack. On the other hand, his counters absolutely failed to defeat her guard. They circled several more times, trading blows, and then Jelan broke off, yielding a step or two.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured. “You are much more skilled than I remember. You always had the speed and eye for swordsmanship, Jack, but where did you acquire your training?”

Jack wondered about that himself until the answer came to him. “To you, it’s been about two months since our meeting at the wild mythal,” he said. “But to me, it’s been four years. I studied some swordsmanship after our last, er, parting.”

“Not very seriously, or after four years you would have been even better.”

He gave a small shrug. “You should know me well enough to know that I do few things seriously, Elana. I am something of a dilettante.”

She paused and studied him again. “How is it that you, too, are alive after all this time?”

Jack grimaced. “In some unfathomable expression of cosmic irony, I was imprisoned in the very same spot where I’d left you, about four years after our little adventure in the Underdark. We were both released from the mythal stone at the same time. You were still petrified. I was not, so the drow put me to work in their fields.”

“Who imprisoned you?”

“I do not know. I have no memory of how I came to be locked in the mythal stone.”

“Fascinating,” she replied. Then she attacked again. This time she changed styles, using a different set of strikes and parries that sorely tried Jack. Her blade bit through his guard to kiss his shoulder—a grazing cut, shallow but bloody. Before he could recover she kicked his knee out from under him. In pure panic Jack reached out for his magic and wove a quick invisibility spell, vanishing from sight. Jelan’s eyes narrowed, and she stabbed at the center of the spot where he’d just been standing; Jack narrowly twisted aside. With uncanny quickness Jelan homed in on his gasp of exertion and the scuffle of his boot, pursuing him closely. Jack swore and abandoned the field, backing off a good ten paces to the other side of the foyer.

“I was wondering when you would resort to magic,” Jelan remarked, cocking her head to one side as she listened for any hint to his location. “Your recent training helps, Jack, but you are still not my equal.”

Jack could think of no good response. His shoulder stung fiercely, and his breath was already coming in pants. The swordswoman smiled menacingly as she caught the sound of his labored breathing and began edging toward him. He could flee the manor, of course, but he didn't want to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for Myrkyssa Jelan. On the other hand, he didn't think he could best her with steel, and no magic of his could touch her. To buy himself a little more time to recover, and to perhaps find a way out of his conundrum, he decided to keep her talking. "How did you escape the drow?" he asked.

"My family's ancient curse of unmagic finally reasserted itself; the magic that kept me petrified failed," Jelan replied. She paced forward into the foyer, her katana held in a low guard. "The dark elves on the scene attempted to take me prisoner, but my mail was proof against their poisoned crossbow bolts, and their spells naturally did not affect me."

"Naturally," Jack agreed. He held his breath and slipped a few steps from where he'd spoken, hoping to deceive her.

"I took an important-looking fellow hostage, and made him create darkness around us until I could slip away into the Underdark tunnels surrounding their stronghold. It took me five or six days of careful exploration, but I eventually mastered the caverns and passages and found my way back to the surface along the routes the slavers use." Jelan paused, listening for some sign of Jack. "That, by the way, is one more tally on the score I owe you. I did not appreciate waking up to find myself surrounded by drow, or days and days of hungry monsters and privations as I trekked my way out of the Underdark."

"The involvement of dark elves a hundred years in the future was something I never could have foreseen during our previous … disagreements, Elana." Jack moved stealthily again, now sidling into the manor's large front parlor.

"But you were content to leave me frozen in that damned stone for four full years while you went about your life."

"Elana, as far as I knew, you were dead," Jack replied. "And even if I had known that you were alive, I would not have retrieved you

from the stone. You were the Warlord, and I am a Ravenaar, loyal to my city—after my own fashion." He watched as she continued to advance, readying himself to parry or flee if she guessed his location. "If it is any consolation to you, someone has treated me in much the same manner that you feel I treated you. I, too, have lost a hundred years and many friends. A certain sort of justice has already been rendered on my actions; there is no need for you to seek further redress."

To his surprise, Jelan halted her advance. She stood in the doorway, peering toward a place uncomfortably close to where Jack actually stood with her eyes narrowed in thought. Jack decided to press his point. "If you could have picked any punishment short of running me through, wouldn't you have inflicted on me exactly the fate you endured? For good or ill, you and I are bound by this common experience. Who else understands what you have lost?"

"I have no use for your sympathy," Jelan snarled. She glared at the parlor for a good ten heartbeats … but then, with a single angry motion, she slammed her katana back into its sheath. "Yet even a fool may err and speak wisely. If you are telling the truth—which is hard to believe in and of itself—then perhaps fate has indeed balanced the debt in the matter of my imprisonment. It is not for me to defy the wheel of fate, no matter how much I dislike its turnings. I was the Warlord of the Vast; kingdoms trembled at my footsteps. Now that glory lives only in my memory, and yours."

Jack lowered his rapier cautiously. His shoulder burned where Jelan's steel had touched him. As strange as he might find his circumstances, at least he hadn't lost a throne at the same time he'd lost a century. What might that do to a person, even someone as rational and redoubtable as Myrkyssa Jelan? He allowed his invisibility spell to fade away—he couldn't hold it much longer in any event, given his limited magical strength at the moment—and slowly returned to view. He studied her fierce features for a moment, and asked simply, "What will you do now?"

Jelan snorted. "The same as I have always done. I mean to win the highest place my ambitions and opportunities allow me." She strode

past Jack toward the door, pausing just long enough to poke one mailed finger into his breastbone. “Enjoy your good fortune while it lasts, Jack. Tomorrow may tell a different tale.”

She pushed past him and stormed out into the night. Jack stood staring after her, absently rubbing the sore spot in the middle of his chest where she’d poked him. After a long moment, he recovered enough presence of mind to shut the front door and bolt it securely. “Two things are clear,” he muttered aloud. “One, Edelmon is either hard of hearing or exceptionally discrete. Two, I shall have to issue another standing directive to the staff: Swordplay in the house is always to be investigated immediately.”

With a sigh, he went to go rouse Edelmon to have someone stitch his cut.



After the physician left, Jack spent a very restless night tossing and turning, kept awake by the fresh stitches in his shoulder and the possibility that Myrkyssa Jelan might change her mind and return to murder him. He had no idea what opportunities or ambitions she entertained, but he remembered all too well what she’d once made of herself—conqueror, revolutionary, subversive, enemy to all of Raven’s Bluff. Would she abandon her old designs and start over again somewhere else? Or did she still nurse dreams of making Raven’s Bluff the seat of a kingdom won through her own indomitable will? And if so, how would she proceed? Her formidable network of spies, secret supporters, and devoted henchmen had been shorn away by the passage of the years, but somehow Jack doubted that would daunt the Warlord for long. In fact, if Tharzon was correct in his suspicions about the Moon Daggers—whoever they were—she might already be at work building a new base of power.

Jack was very comfortable in his current situation, with bright prospects indeed. The last thing he needed was for Myrkyssa Jelan to begin stirring up trouble again. Jack had no wish to cross her, but any way he considered the question, he could only conclude that she hadn’t given up on her schemes. If Jelan had escaped the

Underdark a few days after Dresimil Chûmavh had ordered Jack to recount what he knew of the Warlord, then she'd had at least three or four tendays to settle in to Raven's Bluff. What had she been doing during that time?

"She's established enough to catch wind of Seila Norwood's return and the part I played in it," he grumbled at the gilt ceiling over his huge bed. "And it seems likely she has something to do with the Sarkonagael and the offered reward." It was simply too great of a coincidence that the Sarkonagael should be publicly remarked upon in the very month when both Jack and Myrkyssa regained their freedom. Who else would have recognized its importance? Had she stolen it from the poster of the reward? Was she herself the poster? Or was there some other, less obvious connection between them? If Jelan didn't have the Sarkonagael, she'd be looking for it. And if she did have it, then that was something that would be very good for him to know.

Jack finally drifted off into a fitful slumber. When he woke, he hurried through his breakfast and the morning correspondence—taking note of the engagements that were already beginning to dot his social calendar—then dressed quickly. Sometime during the night he'd come up with an idea that might determine the Sarkonagael's whereabouts with comparative ease, and he was anxious to test it. He set out from Maldridge before nine bells had struck on a gray and rainy morning. A six-block stroll north on MacIntyre Path brought him to a weather-beaten building of sandstone and brick, covered in peeling gray plaster. A tarnished nameplate over the single street-facing door read Seekers' Guildhall.

"It seems that the years haven't been kind to the Diviners' Guild," Jack reflected aloud. Still, he might as well see what he could learn.

He tried the door and found that it opened with a wretched creaking of its hinges. A hallway paneled in dark wood led deeper into the building. "Good morning," Jack called. "Is anybody here?"

He was answered by a disembodied voice that echoed through the hall. "Enter, seeker," it intoned. "Your coming was foretold."

"If that is the case, one might have expected to be greeted by name at the door," Jack remarked.

“Your skepticism was foretold as well. Advance to the end of the hall. All your questions have their answers here.”

Jack did as he was instructed. As he neared the end of the hall, a concealed panel slid aside, revealing a small room lavishly decorated with purple drapes, hanging censers from which ribbons of aromatic smoke rose, and a table on which rested a sparkling crystal ball bigger than Jack’s head. At the head of the table sat a white-bearded old gnome who wore a shapeless baglike hat of purple felt decorated with silver moons and stars. “Please, seeker, be seated,” the gnome said.

Jack nodded and took the seat opposite the gnome. He folded his hands in his lap and waited in silence until the gnome frowned and peered more closely at him.

“Well?” the small wizard said. “What is it that you seek?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that I needed to tell you,” Jack answered. “My coming was foretold, so I thought my business would be equally apparent.”

The gnome glowered. “It is not wise to test the powers unseen, young one! Know that I am Aderbleen Krestner, Master Diviner. To pay proper respect to the unseen powers, speak your name and business, if you please.”

“I am the Landsgrave Jaer Kell Wildhame, and I am in need of a divination,” said Jack. “I seek a book called the Sarkonagael.”

The gnome laughed at Jack. In fact, he laughed so long that his guffaws became dry whistling gasps and tears ran down his wrinkled cheeks. Jack glanced around, wondering if there might be some other object of humor in the cluttered chamber, and he finally crossed his arms and tapped his toe. “I fail to see what provokes this unseemly display,” he snapped.

“First,” the gnome wheezed, “You are the fifth treasure-seeker, troubleshooter, or bored dilettante to ask for my assistance about this matter, as if I couldn’t read the handbills and spot a reward notice for myself. Second, why in the world do you believe the tome’s location can be divined? If the book could be found by divination, someone would have done so already, and no reward for you.”

“Ah, but I possess an advantage that other seekers likely lack,” Jack said.

“Advantage? What advantage?” Aderbleen asked, frowning suspiciously at Jack.

“I have seen the book they are looking for,” Jack replied. “In fact, I have handled it at length, although that was a long time ago. If I recall correctly, it is much easier to divine the location of something that has been handled and studied than something that is simply known about. None of your professional colleagues have even the slightest clue what it looks like.”

Aderbleen’s bushy eyebrows rose. “That may prove significant,” he admitted. “I am willing to make the attempt; my customary fee is five hundred gold crowns. The spirits advise me to require payment in advance.”

“The spirits are a grasping and suspicious lot,” Jack answered. “Perhaps they’d be inclined to accept one hundred crowns in advance, and a ten percent cut of the reward when I collect it?”

“The spirits dislike your stinginess,” the gnome shot back. “They refuse to be consulted for less than four hundred crowns. After all, your ability to successfully utilize the information they impart is unknown at this time.”

“Perhaps the spirits should augur the odds of my success, then.”

“That is another divination altogether,” the diviner replied. They dickered back and forth for a few minutes, and finally agreed on two hundred pieces of gold, with a bonus should the tome be recovered.

Satisfied, the diviner rubbed his small hands together and motioned to the crystal ball at the center of the table. “Lean close, resting your hands on the table,” he intoned. “Gaze into the orb, and bring to mind everything you recall of this book—its look, its feel, the smell of its pages, words or passages you recall. We shall see what we shall see.”

Jack complied, concentrating on his memory of the Sarkonagael with all his might. The gnome chanted softly, summoning his magic; the room seemed to grow dim and the crystal ball grew brighter. He remembered the weight of the book in his hands, the black

leather cover with an embossed silver skull, the title stamped out with silver chasing. In the crystal orb a misty image began to take shape, a dark book lying on a large stone table. Parchment and lesser tomes lay scattered around it.

"Ah, you have indeed seen this book before," Aderbleen whispered. "No other attempt gained even the faintest glimpse. Let us draw back and see more of the surroundings." He murmured softly, continuing to shape his spell, and the image in the orb shrank and slid out of view just as if Jack had stepped back and turned his head in a different direction. Now he could see something of the surroundings: A large chamber of dressed stone blocks, the floor made of gleaming yellow marble, crimson pillars carved in the shape of heroic dwarves supporting the ceiling high above. At one end of the hall or chamber there stood a dais crowned by a great altar in the shape of an anvil; a mosaic on the wall behind the altar displayed the image of a huge hammer surrounded by fire and lightning. Bookshelves and work tables were arranged haphazardly throughout the grand hall. The whole scene was illuminated by gleaming golden crystal-lamps worked cunningly into the pillar-sculptures of the dwarf heroes.

"The book lies in Sarbreen, somewhere beneath our feet," Aderbleen said. "Find this chamber, and you will find the book."

"Sarbreen is a very large place, full of monsters and ancient traps," Jack protested. "I can hardly search the entire ruin for a single chamber, no matter how grand."

"Well, I can also tell you that the tome lies about eight hundred and twenty-five yards in that direction," Aderbleen said, pointing at a shallow angle toward the floor behind Jack's back. "However, there is no way to know which entrance to the ruins is actually closest to the Sarkonagael's location once the twists, turns, and blind alleys of the ancient city are taken into account. Try somewhere in northern Sarbreen, about two or three levels down."

Jack peered again at the image in the crystal ball. He thought he saw a shadow of movement … but it was gone almost at once. He didn't know where in Sarbreen that chamber might lie, but he knew someone who might. "Very well," he said. "That is certainly more

than I knew before I arrived on your doorstep as foretold." It was also a strong indication that the Sarkonagael was not currently in Myrkyssa Jelan's hands, nor in immediate danger of discovery by some other treasure-hunter. "Need I remind you that what we have seen in your crystal ball should remain strictly confidential? If someone else should reach the book before I do, you will not receive the bonus we agreed upon."

"The spirits are not stupid," Aderbleen replied.

"Very good." Jack stood up, and bowed to the small mage. "With luck the spirits will soon reveal to you our mutual success. Now, will the unseen powers lead me forth, or should I just show myself out the door?"

"Oh, just go back the way you came in," the gnome snapped. He hopped down from his chair and pointed Jack to the door. Jack bowed his head again to Master Aderbleen, and left the Seekers' Guildhall whistling a merry air.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Although Jack wanted to make inquiries about where exactly in Sarbreen a great abandoned temple might be found, he had to keep an eye on his social calendar if he wanted to continue to present himself as a lordling reestablishing himself in the city's noble circles. The Sarkonagael seemed safely hidden in Sarbreen for now; he could retrieve it at his convenience. So, with some regrets, Jack passed the rest of the day in his newfound social engagements. He endured a long and rather tedious lunch at the home of Lady Moonbrace and a circle of her relations and friends—all of them very prim and proper ladies whose average age must have approached eighty years—discovering that they seemed most interested in the fact that he was a young, unmarried lord new to Raven's Bluff and a potential prospect for their various matchmaking skills. Fortunately Jack escaped with little more than vague promises to attend various affairs where he gathered that nieces, daughters, and granddaughters would be thrown at him in the hopes that one might stick.

The reception at the playhouse was somewhat more interesting (and expensive). It was attended by a rather more eclectic group of nobles, merchants, and adventurers who'd blundered into enough good fortune to consider themselves patrons of the arts. Several of the reception guests were fine-looking young women who seemed quite taken by the rumors of Jack's derring-do in Seila Norwood's escape from the Underdark. He had to remind himself constantly that these were circles in which Seila and her family frequently moved. As tempting as it was to flirt with bored noble lasses intrigued by someone as novel as Lord Jaer Kell Wildhame, he couldn't afford to let any stories of misbehavior get back to Seila, not if he hoped to pursue the Norwood fortune and her very lovely favors as well. Jack survived the occasion by replacing in his mind's eye the more fetching and forward ladies at the theater with Lady

Moonbrace's friends, and made a note to himself to reverse the procedure the next time he found himself in Lady Moonbrace's company.

The next day, the formal invitation to the celebratory affair at Norwood Manor was waiting for Jack when he came down for his breakfast. He admired the elegant card—golden ink on bleached vellum, hand-lettered with flowing calligraphy—which read, *Dear Friend, the Lord and Lady Norwood humbly request your attendance for a banquet and spring revel at Norwood Manor on the occasion of their daughter Seila's return safe and whole from captivity*. "I observe that the event is described as a return and not a rescue," Jack sniffed. He felt a little offended, but then he read further: *Please join us on the evening of the Tenth of Tarsakh as we celebrate this joyous occasion and honor Lord Jaer Kell Wildhame, the hero responsible for Seila's return to Norwood Manor. Dinner will be served at seven bells; regrets only*.

"Well, that is more like it," he said aloud. "Now, what else do we have here?"

Beneath the invitation was a small envelope addressed to him in a feminine hand; he opened it and discovered a note from Seila, a reply to his letter of a day or two ago. She wrote about the hustle and bustle of the party preparations, the simple joys in rediscovering the routines of her life before the slavers abducted her, and hinted at the return of two or three former suitors who had thoughts of resuming their pursuits now that she had been miraculously brought away from captivity in the Underdark. "Why, I think she means to make me jealous," Jack muttered. "Well, those noble popinjays who think they can pick up where they left off will be in for a surprise. First, this is a matter of business to me, not idle romance. I will not be easily daunted. And second, none of *them* managed to rescue Seila from the drow."

He read on and found that Seila had asked him to come visit her before the banquet and to stay the night afterward. His heart skipped a beat at that thought, until he read a bit further and discovered that a guest room on the far side of the manor from her chambers was reserved for his use. Still, it was heartening to see

that she cared enough to make special arrangements for him—a very good sign indeed, really.

Jack glanced at the topmost handbill waiting by his breakfast; it was the morning of the eighth. He would want to be at Norwood Manor the afternoon of the tenth, but that meant he still had the better part of two days before the party. “Edelmon!” he called.

The old valet answered at once. “Yes, Master Jack?”

“What engagements do I have in the next couple of days?”

“I have arranged for Master Limner Nander Willon to call at three bells this afternoon to consult with you on the Wildhame arms and emblems. This evening there is a performance of *The Bride of Secomber* at the Stane Opera House; you have been invited to join Lord and Lady Flermeer in their box. Tomorrow Master Silverstitch hopes to perform a fitting, and the Ravenaar Historical Society has invited you to speak at their monthly meeting.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “The Historical Society?” he asked dubiously.

“Its membership includes representatives of many of the city’s most respected families, Master Jack. They are very anxious to speak with you, because it is rumored that you knew the notorious Warlord Myrkyssa Jelan personally.”

Jack wondered what the bespectacled bookworms of the Historical Society would make of the fact that the Warlord was at large in their city at this very moment. He’d decided to keep the tale from the authorities for now; he wasn’t completely confident that it would be possible to convince a magistrate or watch-captain that a legendary threat of long ago was walking the streets of the city today, or that it would profit him to bring it to their attention. After all, he had once been pursued by the Knights of the Hawk simply because he was acquainted with Myrkyssa Jelan. “Very well, I will attend,” he said.

“Oh, and a Master Tarandor of the Wizards’ Guild has requested an appointment the morning of the tenth.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure when I might ride out to Norwood Manor. Or, for that matter, when I’ll return. Put him off for now, I’ll meet with him after Seila’s revel.”

“Very good, my lord,” Edelmon replied. He bowed and withdrew.

Jack finished his breakfast, and contemplated his day for a moment. It seemed that he had a few hours available; this might be a good opportunity to lay the groundwork for retrieving the Sarkonagael from the depths of Sarbreen. Although no one else seemed likely to divine its location as Jack had done, it wouldn’t be wise to assume the book would remain hidden forever. After all, he couldn’t be certain that some other competent adventurer wouldn’t stumble across the Sarkonagael by following some other line of investigation or through sheer good luck.

“Not so urgent that I cannot attend Seila’s revel first, but too important to leave to chance for long,” Jack told himself. He was less than enthusiastic about venturing into the infamous dungeon of Sarbreen again, let alone venturing into any subterranean place where dark elves might be lurking. But as it so happened, he knew someone who was very familiar with Sarbreen. He hopped up from his chair, threw on a cape and hat, and set out into the city.

The morning was foggy, but the mists had a burnished glow above the rooftops that suggested they might soon burn off. Jack walked over to Moorland Ride and followed that street north until he reached Vesper Way near the city wall, and then he turned left. At the mouth of the alleyway between Moorland and Manycoins a stealthy motion caught his eye; Jack took two quick steps toward the center of the street and set his hand on his rapier’s hilt. Peering through the chilly shadows he glimpsed a cloaked and hooded figure retreating down the alley. The figure turned to glance back at him just before ducking into a cellar stair. Jack thought he saw a face of inky black framed by fine white hair and perhaps a hint of ruby-red eyes, but he couldn’t be certain.

“Surely that was not a drow abroad in daylight,” he murmured aloud. Then again, the morning was foggy; it was not a bright day by any means. He stood still for a long moment as passers-by strode past and carts trundled over the cobblestones, but no one else seemed to have noticed the cloaked figure. Were the dark elves spying on his movements? Had he caught sight of a drow engaged

in some other private business that had nothing to do with him? Or were his eyes simply playing tricks on him?

Jack finally removed his hand from his swordhilt with a small shrug and went on his way. He knew that there were drow under the city, after all, and this fellow hadn't paid any unusual attention to him. There was no sense in borrowing trouble, so to speak. Crossing Manycoins Way, he found the Smoke Wyrm and rapped on the taproom door.

This time, old Tharzon himself answered. "Jack! Come to trade more tales already? Or do you prefer to start the day's drinking early? It's not good to get in the habit of drinking in the morning, you know."

"Sound advice, friend Tharzon, and counsel I intend to heed," Jack replied. "No, I have need of your unmatched knowledge of Sarbreen and its dark and dangerous ways. You knew more about the place than anyone in the city a hundred years ago; I can only imagine your wisdom has grown since."

The gray-bearded dwarf gave a low laugh. "It didn't take you long to find yourself some new scheme, did it? Well, come inside. I will see what I can do." He led the way to the taproom—empty again, as it was still an hour shy of opening for the day—where Kurzen was busy breaking out new kegs and setting them up behind the bar. The younger dwarf gave Jack a friendly nod and went on with his work as Tharzon and Jack found seats by the hearth.

"Where's that fetching noble lass of yours this morning?" Tharzon asked.

"At Norwood Manor, so far as I know. Her father decided that he'd be happy to put me up here in town, so I've been staying in a fine house over in Tentowers." Jack gave Tharzon a grin. "I think he suspected my motives toward Seila."

"Aye, well, he would be wise to," the dwarf agreed. "So what do you want to know about Sarbreen, Jack?"

"Have you ever heard of a great hall with pillars carved in the shape of ancient dwarf warriors? The floor is made of honey-gold marble, and there is an altar of some sort in the shape of a great

anvil. Behind the altar is an old mosaic of a hammer surrounded by fire."

"Ah, the Temple of the Soulforger. That's the place you're speaking of, Jack."

"The Temple of the Soulforger?"

"Moradin's shrine, Jack, Moradin's shrine. Sarbreen held a magnificent cathedral consecrated to the maker of all dwarves. There's no mistaking the anvil altar."

"Where is it?" Jack asked. "Do you know how to get there?"

Tharzon's brow lowered as he eyed Jack for a moment. "What business do you have in the Temple of the Soulforger, Jack? You don't intend anything … disrespectful, do you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I consulted with a seer of the Diviners' Guild yesterday, and that's the place I saw in my vision. Someone collected a number of old tomes and scrolls and left them in the temple; I'm looking for one in particular. The temple itself I have no designs upon." Well, not unless there's some great treasure lying about just waiting to be pocketed, he added to himself.

Tharzon held Jack's gaze a moment before nodding to himself. "In that case, then yes, I can tell you how to find it. But it's on one of the deeper levels, and it's not a journey for the faint of heart. That quarter of Sarbreen is dangerous, Jack, very dangerous, with monsters of sorts you won't find roaming the sewers just beneath your feet. If you mean to get to the Soulforger's Temple, you'll want some good swordarms at your back, and probably a mage as well."

Jack sighed. He'd hoped the temple would be somewhere close to the surface and not terribly perilous to reach. After all, his circumstances were reasonably comfortable at the moment, and he didn't feel any particular driving need to risk life and limb unless the prize was truly extraordinary. On the other hand, he knew where the Sarkonagael was and no one else did. It would be a shame to pass by that sort of opportunity, especially with the chance to double his fortune as the stakes.

He leaned a little closer to Tharzon and asked, "Have you kept your hand in the game at all, Tharzon? Do you know where I might

find a few trustworthy fellows who'd be willing to dare Sarbreen for a great prize?" Once upon a time Tharzon had been a thief almost as skilled as Jack himself, although the dwarf was by nature a tunneler and a lockpick. His thefts were patient and methodical affairs, the sort of work for which Jack had never had the temperament.

"I retired forty years ago," the dwarf replied. He tapped his cane on the ground. "My knees are ruined, and my back's none too good, either. I decided a long time ago to let younger dwarves worry about what sort of monsters they might meet in the dark and whether the authorities might nab them as they went about their trade. Too much risk, not enough profit." He gave a small shrug. "Besides, the Smoke Wyrm returns a decent living for an honest day's work."

Jack glanced around the taproom and raised an eyebrow. "Friend Tharzon," he said, "I have the feeling that your honest day's work is more loosely defined than you let on." After all, a profitable and well-known business was the perfect cover for a fence; the taproom likely provided Tharzon with all the spare coin he needed to buy what working thieves had to sell. "Tell me, do you export that excellent stout of yours?"

"As it turns out, we ship it all over the Vast. Tantras, Calaunt, Procampur, even across the Dragon Reach to Harrowdale sometimes," Tharzon admitted. "Sometimes the kegs are a wee bit heavy."

Jack tipped his cap to his old comrade. "Clever, my old friend, very clever. So what of it? Do you know any good hands who could help me?"

"I thought you intended to make a great show of becoming respectable, Jack."

"Becoming respectable is a surprisingly expensive process. And there's nothing disreputable about venturing into the lost halls of Sarbreen to indulge an interest in archaeology or lost artifacts. Who knows what sort of harmless eccentricities the Landsgrave Jaer Kell Wildhame might indulge? Why, strange tastes and extravagant habits are the very hallmark of nobility!" Jack paused a moment to

further consider Tharzon's point. "Still … it wouldn't do to be seen in truly unsavory company. No murderers, necromancers, or gnomes, if it can be helped."

Tharzon leaned back in his chair, absently knotting his thick fist around his cane. His eyes took on a sharper, more calculating expression as he gazed toward the hearth. "I have a few handy fellows in mind," he said. "They'll want a cut of the prize, mind you. But they've had a thin time of it lately and they shouldn't drive too hard a bargain. I could arrange for you to meet them in a day or two."

"Can I trust them?"

"Only if you're a fool, but I can see to it that you've got a friend at your shoulder." The old dwarf rapped the cane on the floor again and called to Kurzen, still working to ready the taproom for the afternoon's patrons. "Boy, leave that nonsense be for now and come have a seat. There's business to discuss."

Kurzen set the last of the kegs in place behind the bar, brushed his hands off on his apron, and came over to join his father and Jack. "What's the work, Da?" he asked.

"Sarbreen, the seaward quarter, five levels down. Jack here has a book he's looking for, and if there's one valuable tome lying about, there's likely to be two. We'll bring in Narm and his band. They haven't been too lucky of late, so they ought to be willing enough."

Kurzen studied Jack for a moment, his dark eyes stern and unfriendly. "I've heard plenty of good stories about you, but it's my neck as well as yours. Are you any use in a scrape?"

"Ask your Da," Jack replied. "I saved him from a deep dragon once. And we fought the Warlord and her sellswords together."

The younger dwarf looked over to Tharzon, who shrugged. "Jack's not the man you want if you're *looking* for a scrape, but he's a good fellow to have on your side if you find one you weren't expecting," he said. "He's quick on his feet, he's a fair hand with a blade, and he's got a little magic. But most important he's got an eye for opportunity, and his wits are sharp. You could do worse, my boy."

Jack nodded to Tharzon and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. Anything he said after that wouldn't help

much, so he waited for Kurzen to make up his mind. After a moment, the younger dwarf gave a grudging nod of his own. “All right, I’m in,” he said. “When do you want to make the try?”

“Four or five days from now,” Jack decided. Sooner would be better, but there was no way he was going to risk missing the Norwood revel by getting himself stuck in Sarbreen somehow. “Now, let’s talk about how we’ll split the loot. In my experience it’s best to deal with that question right up front to prevent unfortunate misunderstandings later.”



Any fears Jack might have felt about boredom setting in before the grand event at Norwood Manor proved ill-founded. He spent the afternoon of the eighth designing the Wildhame arms with the help of the limner, claiming to remember a device of three sable stags on a golden field divided by a scarlet chevron, with grapevines wreathing the emblem and the motto DARE, STRIVE, TRIUMPH on a scroll below. Master Willon thought it was a handsome crest indeed and promised to have it rendered and engraved in a tenday. After that, Jack attended the opera, discovering that the *Bride of Secomber* was a work of comic genius, flamboyantly played by its talented cast. Lord and Lady Flermeer struck him as somewhat coarse and grasping, asking him to bring up this suggestion or that with his good friend Marden Norwood when it was convenient; Jack soon realized that the Flermeers were desperate to get themselves into Norwood’s good graces, but he played along by generously offering to endorse any proposals they wished to advance.

The following day, he spent his morning with the Historical Society—which, as it turned out, provided him with an excellent opportunity to address a longstanding injustice of which he hadn’t been aware. Rather to his chagrin, Jack discovered that he was not remembered kindly in the accounts that had survived from his former time. Some versions suggested that he was a common criminal in Jelan’s employ, while others presented him as a feckless dupe whose bumbling efforts nearly handed the Warlord her final victory, and a few failed to mention him at all. Outraged, he went

to great lengths to correct the inaccurate records of the events surrounding Myrkyssa Jelan's fall in a manner that suitably reflected his own involvement. In the afternoon, he called on master tailor Gregor Silverstitch to pick out several of his finished garments for the Norwood banquet.

As Jack went about the town from the opera house to the Historical Society's meeting-place to the tailor's fitting room, he kept his eyes open for mysterious figures skulking about in dark cloaks, but no more drow—real or imagined—crossed his path. By the time he returned home the day before the Norwood ball, he discovered that new invitations and calling cards were waiting for his attention.

"What do these people *do* when they're not calling on each other?" Jack wondered aloud, examining the correspondence in his study. "Why, keeping up with the social obligations is a profession all its own."

"Many gentlemen occupy themselves with their investments and speculation," Edelmon informed him. "Others take an interest in sporting events, such as hunting, boating, racing, or various games of chance."

That caught Jack's interest. "I assume wagering is involved?"

"Very much so, Master Jack. As they say, horse racing is the sport of kings."

"That has distinct possibilities. See if you can't find out when the next event of that sort is to take place, and who I would have to ingratiate myself with to win an invitation. I am a great admirer of contests of skill." He was an even greater admirer of gambling, of course. If he couldn't find a way to separate a few foolish layabouts from generous portions of their inheritances, then he was no thief at all. He was a professional, after all, and he'd knife through any casual gamblers' games like a wyvern stooping on sheep. The only difficulty would be to avoid winning so much that he made an enemy or acquired a reputation.

"I shall look into it directly, sir," Edelmon replied. He reached over to tap a finger on a small note. "This may be of interest to you. The Turmishan Embassy is hosting a tea the day after tomorrow;

Lady Mislen Hawkynfleur wrote to express the hope that you'll attend."

Jack glanced up at the ceiling, trying to recollect which of the various personages he'd met over the last few days was Mislen Hawkynfleur. After a moment it came to him; she was one of the stately old matrons of Lady Moonbrace's circle. "We shall regretfully decline," Jack replied. "The Norwood affair is the only thing on my calendar for the next two days, Edelmon."

He went to bed early, already drawing up schemes by which he invested in racehorses (or jockeys) and wondering just how one might go about fixing the results of a regatta. When he arose, he was greeted by another fine spring morning, unseasonably clear and warm. "An auspicious beginning to the day," he remarked, and immediately began his daily ablutions. For the ball he decided to wear a long, mustard-yellow coat strikingly trimmed in silver piping over a ruffled white shirt, with red suede boots and a matching red hat crowned by a white plume; his rapier rode in a scabbard low on his left hip. Jack took a quarter-hour to admire his sartorial splendor as he congratulated himself in the mirror and adopted various poses and stances to show off his new clothing. Then he directed Edelmon to pack him a small valise for the night, and engaged a carriage to drive him out to Norwood Manor shortly after noon. A little less than an hour later his carriage clattered down the long drive of the Norwoods' estate and came to a halt at the manor steps.

"Jack, you're here!" Seila hurried down the steps to greet Jack as he climbed down from the coach, and leaned forward to quickly brush her lips against his cheek. She wore a simple blue dress to her ankles; no doubt she had a gown picked out for the evening, but Jack was struck again by her midnight hair and her luminous smile.

He found himself grinning foolishly at her before he regained his composure. "How could I miss this occasion?" he replied. He followed her inside as a valet fetched his bag. The great house was full of servants and workers who were decorating for the party, arranging the furniture, tending to ovens that already smelled delicious, and setting up pavilions and lanterns in the grounds just

behind the manor. Scores of tables and hundreds of chairs were appearing before his eyes, and Jack had to admit he was impressed. “I can see this will be some event,” he remarked. “How many people did your mother invite?”

Seila glanced over her shoulder at him. “Everybody,” she said. “I think we’re expecting around three hundred guests, perhaps a few more. To tell the truth, I’m a little embarrassed by all the attention.”

“Nonsense! You deserve it, my dear, after what you went through.”

“You endured even worse treatment than I,” Seila pointed out.

“Well, in that case I deserve it, too,” Jack answered.

She laughed, and caught his hand, leading him out on to the veranda behind the manor. “I’ve missed you these last few days, Jack. Oh, I’ve heard a great many things about your doings in town—everybody is talking about you—but I can hardly believe you’re the same person who brought me out of Chûmavhraele. How have you been? Have you improved your opinion of our age?”

Jack shrugged. “I am very comfortable at Maldridge, of course—I must thank your father again when I see him—and I am making new friends. However, I have missed you as well. It’s a strange thing to begin a whole new life all at once.” He leaned on the balustrade, gazing out over the gardens. “I feel sometimes that I am waiting to wake up and find that this was all a strange dream.”

Seila reached out to turn Jack’s face toward hers, and she smiled sadly. “I think I know what you mean,” she said. “It’s been harder than I would have imagined to find myself home again. I suppose I’d given myself up for dead; I made my peace with many things. Now here I am, surrounded by the people and things I have loved all my life, and none of them seem the same. They haven’t changed, of course—I have. But my mother, my father, the household servants who have known me all my life, they seem anxious to simply pick up and carry on as if I hadn’t been buried in that awful place for months and months. Why, they hardly want to speak of what happened, but I feel I have to talk to somebody or I’ll just burst!”

Jack stood in silence for a moment, weighing her words. He was many things, but a canny student of the human heart was not one of them. Still, from time to time he chanced upon insight, and one came to him as he looked at Seila standing in the sunshine. “Your family and friends don’t mean to misunderstand you,” he finally said. “Whether they know it or not, they think it’s a kindness to forget those awful days as quickly as they can, and they believe that you must want to do the same.” A sudden thought struck him, and he laughed softly at himself. “And that might help to explain why your father was so anxious to remove me from your house. Well, that and the fact that he must worry that I entertain designs upon your virtue.”

Seila glanced away with a small snort. “He’s been worried about that since my fifteenth summer, give or take. It seems that every young man with prospects in the Vast knows that I’m the heir to the Norwood fortune and has a mind to seek my hand. Every few months a new suitor arrives at our doorstep, a complete stranger who hopes to persuade my father that he’s the best match for me … and at the same time sweep me off my feet with charm and flattery.”

Listen well, Jack, he told himself. She’s telling you how not to win her affections. “I gather none of them have won your heart,” he said carefully.

“My father points out that I’m now in my twentieth year, and it’s time to settle this question for the sake of the family. I know there are several good prospects that would please him well, and that a girl in my situation must make this sort of decision with her head, and not her heart. Still … I don’t feel that I am ready to marry yet, especially with the shadow of my time in the drow castle lingering over me.” She looked back up to Jack. “I should warn you, by the way, that several of my former suitors will be in attendance tonight. I have no doubt they’ll spend much of the evening trying to elbow each other out of the way to get to my side.”

He straightened up and rendered her a formal bow. “I shall of course defend you from any unwanted attentions,” he declared. “No

well-born bore will ruin this night for you as long as I have anything to say about it."

"Do I detect a note of jealousy?" Seila asked sweetly.

"I'm afraid I'm becoming far too fond of your company to share it easily. Your father may not be entirely wrong about me, after all."

Seila blushed and lowered her eyes. "Jack, I don't know if I—if we —"

"I understand," he said. "It's best not to rush into this sort of thing, especially because we met in such dark circumstances. It would be easy to mistake one's feelings." He reached out to rest his hand on hers. "But you'll forgive me if I hope that no tall, handsome lordling from a fine family sweeps you off your feet tonight."

Seila looked into his eyes again, and Jack could feel his head swim. For a moment they stood there together a little awkwardly; Jack realized he had no idea whether to say more, to say less, or simply to reach out and plant an audacious kiss upon her sweet red lips. Fortunately, Marden Norwood inadvertently came to Jack's rescue. The silver-haired lord appeared on the veranda and caught sight of Jack. "Ah, Wildhame," he said, striding over to offer his hand. "I thought I'd heard that you were here. Good of you to come."

"Lord Norwood," Jack replied. He returned the old lord's handclasp firmly. "My thanks for the invitation; I am happy to help commemorate the occasion."

"How are you settling in at Maldridge?"

"Very comfortably; it's a splendid old house, and I have no complaints with the staff you left to me. I thank you again for its use."

"The least I could do," Norwood answered. "Now, if I could ask you to join me in my study, I have a small surprise for you—and perhaps a puzzle you might help me solve."

"More gentlemen's talk, Father?" Seila asked.

"Not this time, my dear. In fact, I think you'll find this interesting, too. Please, join us," Marden Norwood beamed and ushered Jack and Seila back inside to the same dark-paneled room where Jack had spoken with him about the drow and their plans. A large

parchment map lay unfurled on the great desk, its corners pinned with stone paperweights.

"As you can see, I've found an excellent map of the Vilhon Reach from just a few years before your time," Norwood said. "I don't believe I mentioned this during our previous conversations, Jack, but as it turns out we Norwoods are in part descended from Vilhonese aristocracy. My grandmother's family fled Chondath during the Plague Years and settled here in the Vast, where she married into the Norwood line."

Jack covered his surprise by coughing into his fine silk handkerchief. "How interesting," he finally replied, adopting a carefully casual manner. "I did not realize you had any knowledge of the Vilhon Reach. Are you familiar with its history and lands, then?"

Norwood smiled. "As Seila can tell you, I am something of an amateur historian."

"Oh, yes," Seila agreed. "Father reads constantly, and his personal library is one of the finest in Vesperin. I couldn't tell you how many dinner conversations have been taken over by whatever happens to have caught his interest that day."

Norwood shook his head modestly and continued. "I wouldn't say I am an expert on the old Reach, but I have been studying up on Vilhonese lands and titles. Naturally, I was curious what had become of your homeland, so I searched through my tomes and dispatched a few letters to other collectors of old lore who might be better informed than I am. Are you well, Wildhame? You look faint."

Jack didn't doubt that he looked stricken. Somewhere a mile or so under my feet, Jaeren and Jezzryd Chûmavh are enjoying a laugh at my expense, he told himself. He put a hand to the bridge of his nose, pretending to steel himself for a moment. To Seila's father he said, "Forgive me, Lord Marden. It's simply struck me again that my homeland is lost now in the past. I find it hard to believe that it is all no more."

"Father, have you no compassion?" Seila scolded. "Why, it breaks his heart just to think of it!"

Jack pinched himself hard enough to bring a tear to his eye, and looked down at the floor again as he struggled to regain his composure.

"I am sorry," Norwood said, raising a hand in a placating gesture. "I simply hoped that I might be able to provide Lord Wildhame with some unexpected good news about the existence of his old family lands or the survival of his kin. Truly, I did not mean to press."

Jack waved away the old lord's apology, making a show of rallying to the topic. "No, no, your father's curiosity is quite understandable," he said to Seila. "Please, Marden, carry on. What can I tell you about Wildhame?"

"Well, it seems that I know less about the region than I'd thought, because I cannot quite place the landgraviate of Wildhame nor discover anything about your family." Norwood grimaced. "I simply did not know where to begin."

Jack drew in a breath, and quickly reviewed everything he'd ever studied for the purpose of creating Jaer Kell Wildhame. He'd actually researched the part at some length back when he first concocted the persona, anticipating that he might need to answer awkward questions. "Wildhame is—was—a county near the Nunwood, rather small and out of the way." He found the small forest on the map, and pointed with the greatest confidence he could muster. "Good hunting in the woodland, as you might expect, and good wine country, too; our vineyards produced a strong, full-bodied red that was best laid down a few years to mellow."

"Ah, just south of the Nunwood?" Marden peered at the map. "Strange, I would have thought those lands to be under the rule of Hlath."

"Oh, the Wildhames are a Hlathan family, Lord Marden. Why, we have a fine house within the city walls, not a stone's throw from the king's palace," said Jack. "But I think of the manor of Wildhame as home."

The silver-haired lord sighed. "This map shows Hlath and the Nunwood, as you can see, but neither survived the Spellplague. The eastern shore of the Vilhon today is a wilderness where no civilized

folk travel if they can help it. I am afraid you are very likely orphaned of family and home both."

"I intend to go see for myself as soon as I am established here," Jack declared. "Not that I doubt your learning or counsel, Norwood; I simply will not be able to rest until I know the fate of my home. One can still take passage to Turmish, I assume?"

"Of course."

"Then, when the spring storms have passed, I may do exactly that."

"Well said, Wildhame," Norwood replied. He clapped Jack on the shoulder and nodded in approval. "Norwood coasters sail regularly to Alaghôn; I will be happy to provide passage whenever you wish to make the journey."

"Again, I thank you, Norwood." Jack had not the slightest intention of sailing off to meander around a land where, as Seila's father put, no civilized people set foot—especially since the landgraviate of Wildhame existed only as a figment of his imagination. He'd find one reason or another to delay sailing until the weather turned again, and by the time he might be expected to try once more, he was certain he could produce "proof" that his lands were destroyed, obviating the need for a tedious journey. By then, if all went well, he might be so established among the elites of Raven's Bluff that there would be no need to ever produce any proof of Jaer Kell Wildhame's aristocratic birth.

Seila's father bowed. "But of course," he said. "Now, I believe that we have a few hours yet before the guests begin to show up. Seila, why don't you introduce your friend to your Aunt Derina and your cousins? If I'm not mistaken, their carriage was just drawing up to the door when I spotted the two of you."

Seila sighed, but she took Jack by the arm. "Come on, Jack," she said. "I'm afraid it's time to meet some more of the family."



Jack spent the afternoon in Seila's company, smiling and bantering his way through a series of introductions to aunts, grand-uncles, second cousins, and dear friends of the family. The Norwood clan

seemed small at first introduction, but it turned out that Lord Norwood had two sisters who'd married into other noble families, while Seila's mother came from the Boldtalon clan. Other than Marden Norwood's sudden and disconcerting interest in the Vilhon Reach, Jack considered the afternoon a success overall. Although he had little time alone with Seila, he made sure to take the opportunity to study her relatives by asking seemingly innocuous questions about who was related to whom, and remind them of his role in Seila's rescue by praising her stoicism and courage in the face of adversity.

The banquet itself was a thoroughly enjoyable affair, even though Jack was, as Seila had warned, introduced to Baron Terent Ampner, Saer Avernil Skyhawk, and Lord Erik Therogeon. All three of the noblemen were said to be interested in courting Seila or striking an alliance with the Norwood family, although Baron Terent was easily twice Seila's age and Lord Erik was a strikingly shy young fellow who seemed quite flustered any time he was addressed by a pretty woman. Avernil Skyhawk, on the other hand, was tall, sandy-haired, and confident, a rival Jack would have to be wary of. He turned out to be a decent fellow, too, and praised Jack effusively for the daring rescue, which made it hard for Jack to dislike Skyhawk as much as he wanted to. However, Jack was the guest who was seated at Seila's elbow, just one place removed from Lord Norwood himself. Jack gamely joined in the table conversation, engaging several of his recent acquaintances from Lady Moonbrace's luncheon, the reception at the playhouse, and of course the meeting of the Historical Society. Wine flowed freely, but Jack indulged with care; he did not want to be remembered for some drunken faux pas.

After the dinner, the guests retired to smoking rooms or parlors while the household staff cleared away the tables in the banquet hall to make space for dancing. Jack accompanied Seila to a drawing room as he plotted his next move. But he was intercepted in the hallway outside the door by a lean, balding man who wore the elegant dress robes of a mage. "Lord Wildhame?" the mage said. "May I have a word with you?"

Jack and Seila turned to face the fellow. He was a man of striking appearance, with winglike sweeps of black hair brushed back above his ears and a long, pointed goatee; both his beard and his temples were shot with narrow streaks of silver-white. Dark eyes glittered beneath a strong brow and a rudderlike nose, but his smile was warm and sincere. The mage inclined his head to Seila, and then Jack. “Allow me to congratulate you on your escape from your imprisonment and your return to Raven’s Bluff.”

Jack returned the fellow’s nod. “I only did the best I could in the circumstances, Master …?”

“Ah, I beg your pardon. Tarandor Delhame, at your service.”

“Master Tarandor,” said Jack, inclining his head again. Where had he heard that name before?

“Please forgive my confusion, but are you by any chance also known as Jack Ravenwild? And enrolled in the Wizards’ Guild as the Dread Delgath?”

Seila’s eyebrow lifted. “ ‘The Dread Delgath’?” she asked. “I shall have to add that to Ravenwild, I suppose. Exactly how many pseudonyms do you have, Jack?”

“In the past I sometimes found it advisable to adopt various aliases for my purposes,” Jack answered. “Remember, it was a different day and age, and the Warlord’s agents were everywhere. It saddens me to say it, but even the Wizards’ Guild was not completely above suspicion then; I did not trust them with my true identity.” He returned his attention to the mage. “I take it you must have spoken with Initiate Berreth.”

“Indeed. The Guild is fortunate to have such a celebrity as yourself among its membership.”

“I am sure the Wizards Guild must include many illustrious gentlemen and adventurers whose exploits outshine my own modest accomplishments,” Jack declared. “It is a pleasure to meet one of my esteemed colleagues in a social setting.”

“Ah, I must admit that I am not actually a member of the Raven’s Bluff guild, although I am acquainted with some of its masters,” said Tarandor. “I belong to the Mage Guild of Iriaebor; I am only visiting for a short time, and must return home soon.”

“What brings you to Raven’s Bluff, Master Tarandor?” Seila asked.

“I have learned that my master left important arcane matters for me to attend here in the Vast,” Tarandor replied. “In fact, I would dearly love to speak with Master Ravenwild about some old business that I think he may be able to help me resolve. It’s something of a mystery, and it’s puzzled me for years.”

Jack wondered what in the world the mage might be referring to, and then his memory finally placed the fellow’s name. “Ah, of course, you’re the Master Tarandor who called at Maldridge. Forgive my tardiness in replying, I have been very busy in the last couple of days.”

The mage waved his hand. “Think nothing of it. But I do need to speak with you, the sooner the better.” Seeing Jack’s hesitation, Tarandor hurried on. “Not tonight, of course. Perhaps noon tomorrow?”

“I may not return to the city until late tomorrow, and I have a previous engagement the day after,” Jack replied. “Better make it the evening of the thirteenth. Shall I expect you at Maldridge around seven bells?”

A look of impatience crossed Tarandor’s features, quickly smoothed away with a small nod and smile of acceptance. “Actually, I hope I can persuade you to join me at the warehouse of Mumfort and Company. It’s in Bitterstone, off Red Wyrm Ride.”

“A warehouse?” Jack asked.

Tarandor spread his hands apologetically. “I have come into possession of a large statue there, which can’t easily be moved. The statue is what I wish to speak to you about.”

“Master Tarandor, I know nothing about any statue.”

“When you see it, I think you will understand why we sought your professional expertise. In the meantime, the less said, the better.”

Jack frowned in puzzlement. He truly had no idea what the wizard was referring to, but he had to admit that his curiosity had been piqued. And it was rather flattering to think that the Guild recognized his unusual experience and expertise and believed he might be of use to a prominent mage visiting from a distant city. It might be a wise investment of his time and effort to go along with

Tarandor's request. "Very well, Master Tarandor, I will offer what help I may. Seven bells on the thirteenth, the Mumfort warehouse on Red Wyrm Ride."

"Excellent!" the wizard replied. He nodded again to Seila and to Jack. "In that event, I will delay you no longer. My congratulations on your safe return, Lady Norwood." With that, the wizard withdrew.

"That was mysterious," Seila remarked.

"Indeed. I am the sort of person around whom mysteries and conundrums seem to gather." Jack indicated the drawing room. "Shall we?"

After a short respite, the guests were summoned back to the banquet hall, which the household servants had transformed into a grand dance floor. A quartet of musicians were situated on a small balcony overlooking the hall; as the partygoers streamed back in, they struck up a merry air, and the dancing began. To his surprise and horror, Jack discovered that he was not at all familiar with the steps of the dances; apparently those, too, had changed during his long absence. Fortunately Seila was a very understanding partner, even if she did laugh at the startled look on his face when everyone on the floor went one way and he went another.

"I see that I am once again a century out of date," he cried in frustration. "How mortifying! I have always been a good dancer."

"Never fear, I'll straighten you out soon enough," Seila replied. "Step, step, step-step, turn and skip. Step, step, step-step, turn and skip."

Jack was a quick study, and he picked up the new steps in short order. Regrettably he had to relinquish Seila's company all too soon; there were only about a hundred or so gentlemen in attendance who wanted to dance with her. He was able to gain her hand two or three times during the evening, but for the most part he had to content himself with a glittering array of elegant young noblewomen, many of them Seila's cousins, distant cousins, or dear friends. He told himself there were worse ways to pass an evening, but he kept an eye on Seila the whole time, mostly watching out for any of his potential rivals.

Sometime a little after midnight, he excused himself for a bit of air and strolled out onto the veranda, gazing over the pavilion and lanterns gracing the garden below. A familiar laugh caught his ear; he turned back toward the ballroom and saw Seila there in the middle of a knot of talkative young noblewomen. He gazed at her from his vantage, admiring the way her smile lit up her face. No, there would be far worse fates than to become the husband of Seila Norwood, he reflected. Not only would he be richer than he'd ever imagined and his place among the Ravenaar noble class cemented for life, he'd have that smile to brighten his days. Why, when he thought about it, he might not care if she were wealthy or not … "Stop that nonsense, Jack," he murmured to himself. "The one sure way to miss your chance is to forget the game you're playing."

He gave himself a firm shake, readjusted his hat to a rakish tilt, and started to return to the fray. Then a voice nearby caught his ear. "Alas, my lady. You wound me, you truly do!" a man said with a low laugh.

Jack paused, and glanced around to find the speaker. He'd heard that turn of phrase before; a moment later he fixed his eye on a tall nobleman with long yellow hair, who stood on the balcony ringing the ballroom's upper floor, conversing with a young noblewoman who laughed at his remark. Something about the fellow seemed familiar, but Jack couldn't quite place him. "I've seen you before, but where?" he murmured aloud. The opera, perhaps? Or the meeting of the Historical Society?

Frowning, Jack stared at the mysterious lord for a long moment, forgetting about Seila and her friends on the dance floor. Tentatively he held out his arm and raised his hand slowly, positioning his fingers in his line of sight until he cropped out the upper half of the man's face. All that was left was the bony jaw and the fringe of yellow hair falling about the fellow's neck. "Ah, there you are," Jack breathed. He'd seen that face and hair before, all right, but masked from the nose up in a leather cowl. The man standing on the balcony was Fetterfist the slaver … and he was apparently a guest at the Norwood ball.

“The dastard,” Jack fumed. Was he entertaining ideas of abducting her again? Or was he there simply because the Norwoods had innocently invited him among all the other assembled nobles of Raven’s Bluff, unaware of the fact that one of the city’s aristocrats was secretly a bloody-handed slaver? Either way, Jack meant to find out at once who the fellow was and expose him to the Norwoods—there was no reason to let Fetterfist walk about free one moment longer than he had to.

At that moment Fetterfist raised his eyes and spied Jack staring up at him. They locked gazes for a brief moment before the yellow-haired lord smiled, straightened, and turned to leave the balcony he stood on.

Jack swore and hurried inside to the hall just outside the ballroom, seeking the stairs to the upper floor. He quickly threaded his way through the elegant throng that mixed and mingled by the grand staircase, bounding up the stairs just in time to see Fetterfist descending the steps at the far end of the upper hall. Jack pursued the fellow at once, hurrying back down and crossing the ballroom to the manor’s foyer, deflecting greetings left and right as he rushed through the crowd. A moment later he clattered out onto the manor’s front steps, where a number of guests waited for their carriages to be brought up. He stood there on the steps, searching the crowd with his eyes, until he finally caught a glimpse of Fetterfist’s face glancing back from a carriage window to the Norwood’s manor. Then the coach with the slaver inside rolled away down the drive.

“Damn the luck,” Jack swore. He looked around desperately for some means of pursuit, but all he could see were more noble carriages and their coachmen. He briefly considered commandeering one, but at that moment Seila emerged from the manor and hurried down to join him on the steps.

“What is it, Jack?” she asked. “I saw you rush away. Is something wrong?”

He debated whether or not to alarm her before deciding that he would rather have her on her guard. “Fetterfist was here,” he told her.

Seila's eyes opened wide, and a look of horror blanched her face. "No," she gasped.

"I recognized him at a distance. Well, I am almost certain I did. When I saw him at Tower Chûmavhraele half his face was hidden by that leather hood, but the shape of the jaw, the hair, his build, they all matched. And he seemed to take an interest in you."

"Was he here as a guest?" Seila asked in a weak voice.

"I'm afraid so. At least, he was dressed for the party and seemed to fit in with the crowd."

"Did you recognize him? I mean, do you know who he is?"

Jack shook his head. "I recognized his face, but that's all. Remember, I don't know many people in this day."

Seila shivered in the cool night air, and wrapped her arms around herself. "Jack, if he means to take me back down to the drow again … I can't go back to that dark awful place. I simply can't!"

Jack caught her in his arms and drew her close; she buried her face in his neck. "Never fear about that," he said. "We'll make sure your father is warned, and we'll find out who he is, trust me. I would die before I'd let them have you again."

And, to his surprise, he realized that he meant exactly what he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The party began to break up an hour or two after midnight, as more and more guests called for their carriages and left for their homes. Jack rather hoped that he might entice Seila to join him in the guest chamber at some point in the night, but Marden Norwood made a firm point of showing him to his room and explaining that a servant would be in the hall just outside his door all night long in case he needed anything.

"For a genial old fellow he seems to entertain an uncomfortably keen sense of curiosity and certain suspicions about my moral fiber," Jack grumbled to himself.

Even with that precaution he might have been tempted to try his luck by stealing his way into Seila's room instead—after all, spells of invisibility or changing appearance were extremely useful for that sort of thing—except that Seila's mother had mentioned that the manor was absolutely full with so many relatives visiting, so Seila would be sharing her room with a couple of her dear cousins. Jack settled for a peck on the cheek at the top of the stairs under Marden's watchful eye, and passed the night quite alone.

He slept late the next morning, recovering from the night's revels, then passed much of the day in a long, chaperoned ride with Seila and several of her close friends. Jack was not an experienced rider, but he hid his discomfort as best he could—any nobleman would be expected to ride well, even one from such a distant realm as the Vilhon Reach of a century past. Later in the afternoon, with his thighs and back aching, he gamely helped Seila go over the previous night's guest list, searching for a name to put with the face of Fetterfist. Based on Jack's description of the man's height, leanness, and yellow hair, Seila was able to line out all but twenty or thirty possibilities.

"This is too many," she complained. "I can't report all these men to the authorities. And most of them belong to very prominent

families. It would be unthinkable to levy an accusation unless we were absolutely sure of ourselves."

"You and your nefarious captor move in the same circles," Jack pointed out. "If you and I attend enough social functions and gatherings together, sooner or later I'll spot the man I saw last night and point him out to you. You'll almost certainly recognize him at that point, and we'll catch our secret slave-dealer."

"Good thinking, Jack," Seila replied. "That might work."

Jack grinned to himself. He thought so, too; why, he was almost grateful to this Fetterfist fellow for showing up, since it would give him the perfect excuse to stick closely to Seila for the foreseeable future. "Send me word of any event you mean to attend," he told her. "I will clear my calendar to make sure I am at your side."

After that, he reluctantly took his leave, returning to Raven's Bluff in a Norwood coach as the afternoon gave way to evening. He enjoyed a quiet supper, gave the day's correspondence a passing glance, and retired at nine bells—he was expected at the Smoke Wyrm early.

The next day the weather reverted to a typical Ravenaar spring, with blustery winds and light showers that threatened to linger all day. Jack arose shortly after dawn and dressed himself with great care. Instead of the elegant tunics and fine capes he'd favored since coming into money, he pulled on a quilted leather jerkin sewn with small steel rings and a long, hooded cloak. He sheathed one dagger in his right boot and another at his right hip, while hanging his fine rapier in a plain wood-and-leather scabbard on his left. He slung a roomy pack over his shoulder, and set out while the cool shadows of morning were still long and dark in the streets.

He found the cellar door of the Smoke Wyrm unlocked, and let himself in with a sharp rap on the lintel. "Hello," he called.

Tharzon appeared in the hallway, leaning heavily on his cane. "Ah, there you are, Jack," he said. "I was afraid you'd sleep away half the day before remembering your work this morning. Well, come on in, you're the last to arrive."

Jack followed Tharzon into the common room. Kurzen stood by one table, checking a large pack of his own; he wore a coat of worn,

blackened steel scales, and a kite-shaped shield was strapped over his shoulder. By the large stone hearth a tall, burly half-orc in a hauberk of chainmail fiddled with the straps of the iron greaves on his shins, while a halfling woman with russet hair tied back in a braid worked on a large dagger with a whetstone. A lean human with long, shaggy braids of red hair and a W-shaped patch of red stubble on his chin sat in a chair by the window. He wore the robes of a mage and smoked a long clay pipe while nursing a mug of steaming tea.

"The company's complete," Tharzon announced. "It seems some introductions are in order. Kurzen you all know, of course. Jack, these three are the remaining members of the Blue Wyvern Company. The tall fellow in the mail is Narm; he's a stout hand in a fight. Next to him, the young lady with the knife is Arlith. And the fellow by the window is Halamar, who's known as a master of fire magic." The old dwarf pointed to the half-orc, halfling, and mage as he named them. "Wyverns, this is Jack Ravenwild, a very resourceful thief and sorcerer back in his day. You might have heard some talk of Lady Norwood's rescue from enslavement in the dark elf realm below Sarbreen; he was the man responsible for that. Today's work is Jack's scheme."

Narm looked Jack up and down and shrugged. "Right, then. What's the prize today?"

"A book of spells named the Sarkonagael," Jack answered. "There is a hefty reward offered for its recovery; we're going to retrieve it from Sarbreen."

"You know where the Sarkonagael is?" Arlith asked. "Half the sellswords and freebooters in this town have been turning the place upside down looking for it. Five thousand crowns is a handsome pile of coin."

"Ah, but unlike all those other amateurs, I've actually seen the book before. I know what I am looking for."

"What sort of spells does the book contain?" the sorcerer Halamar asked from his seat by the window.

"Shadow magic, mostly," Jack answered. "I have no objection to your professional interest and I'll be happy to let you have a look,

but the disposition of the book is not negotiable; I keep it. Well, at least until I am ready to turn it in for the reward."

Halamar took a draw on his pipe. "If it's really full of nothing but shadow magic, then it's not of much interest to me. As good Tharzon observed, most of my magic is in fire."

"Now for the terms," Jack said. "It's my job, so I claim half the reward. The rest you can split four ways—" Tharzon cleared his throat, so Jack amended his split—"er, five ways, because Tharzon of course is owed a share as expediter. That makes five hundred crowns for each of you. And I've got good reason to think there's more to find down there. Whatever else we find besides the Sarkonagael, we'll divide into six equal shares, one for each of us and one for Tharzon. Is that agreeable to all?"

"It seems a little optimistic to divide loot we don't have yet," Narm muttered.

"In my experience, leaving these things to the last leads to hard words and hurt feelings. Better to set reasonable expectations right at the start, I believe."

"Full shares for survivors and kin if one of us doesn't come back?" Arlith asked. She gave Jack a small smile. "In *my* experience, we don't want to give anyone a reason to think about improving their cut."

"Fair enough," Jack decided. He had no intention of engaging in any such dealings, but it was good to know that she didn't, either, and that sort of understanding might serve as a check on anyone who did harbor such designs.

The halfling nodded. "Then I agree to the terms."

"I agree," Narm said. "And I," Halamar added.

"Agreed," said Kurzen. The younger dwarf looked around at the company, then back to Jack. "Have you got everything you need?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Jack answered. "Where's the nearest entrance to Sarbreen?"

Kurzen pointed at a doorway behind the bar. "Right here."

"That seems a little dangerous, keeping a door to a monster-filled dungeon in your place of business," Jack remarked.

Kurzen motioned for the small band to follow him, and then led the way into the Smoke Wyrm's storeroom. Dozens of kegs of ale lined the walls; there were no other exits. Jack was just about to speak again when Kurzen grasped a stack of kegs and pulled it clear of the wall. Instead of toppling over, the whole stack slid together on hidden rollers, revealing a very sturdy-looking door of iron plate secured by heavy bars and padlocks. The dwarf undid the mechanisms one by one, until he pushed the door open, revealing a dark corridor. Water gurgled in the darkness beyond, and a strong whiff of dank air filled the room. "Not the dungeon," the dwarf barkeep replied. "The city sewers. It's handy to have a way to get in and out of the Smoke Wyrm without being seen, after all. We'll find passageways leading down to Sarbreen proper just a little ways in."

"Charming," Jack muttered. "A stroll in the sewers to begin the day. Well, lead on."

Kurzen simply turned right and set off at once. Halamar whispered a word of magic, and a dim golden light began to shine from his staff, illuminating the tunnel. A dry walkway ran along the right-hand side of the sewer, which now ran fast and relatively clear with the runoff from the morning's rain. Jack glanced once behind him; Tharzon gave him a nod, then pulled the hidden door closed. It blended perfectly with the brickwork of the tunnel. The company marched perhaps two blocks under the city streets until they came to a doorway off the sewer. Several steps up led to a dry chamber of strikingly different stonework. On the opposite wall, a wide, shallow staircase descended into darkness beneath an archway flanked by the carven images of two dwarf smiths.

"This was one of the old guardrooms of Sarbreen," Kurzen explained. "The stair was one of the city's main entrances."

"Wouldn't the sewer flood it?" Arlith asked.

Kurzen snorted. "My forefathers knew what they were about. You're standing on the roof of Sarbreen; of course it's designed to shed water away from the living spaces below. When the humans came along later and laid out their city above old Sarbreen, they used these channels as their city's sewer system."

The dwarf barkeep advanced to the archway and peered down the stairs beyond for a moment, then gave the rest of the party a nod and started down. The passage was wide enough for four people to walk abreast, its walls decorated with long, continuous friezes showing scenes of dwarves engaged in all sorts of trades and work. They went on for the better part of a hundred yards until they finally emerged in a wide hall marked by towering columns. A great fountain stood in the center of the hall, but its waters were black and stagnant. Rubble, debris, and dust littered the floor.

"The market hall," Kurzen said softly. "Here surface traders brought their goods to trade with the City of the Hammer. From this point on, stay on your guard. We might meet anything down here."

Kurzen turned to the right again and started to lead the party toward another passage mouth in the wall of the great pillared hall, but at that moment Jack became aware of a sudden soft, flapping rush of footsteps from the shadows by the fountain.

"Behind us!" he shouted as he whirled to meet the threat.

A ragged line of squat, scaly lizard-like creatures charged toward the explorers, armed with spiked clubs and heavy javelins. Several of the creatures paused to throw their darts; the missiles hissed through the air, clattering on the stone floor. Jack ducked under one; another struck Kurzen as he was turning, only to rebound from the dwarf's large shield.

"Troglodytes!" Arlith shouted. She raised a crossbow and fired off a bolt that took one of the monsters in the throat; the creature stumbled to its knees and clutched at its neck.

Then Jack smelled the creatures for the first time, and very nearly threw up at the first whiff of them. They *stank*, not in the way that an unwashed beast might smell rank but with a revolting reptilian musk that was acrid and rotten at the same time. Jack drew his rapier and backpedaled, conjuring a pair of magical missiles in the shape of silvery darts with his left hand. He finished the spell with an arcane word and flicked out his fingertips at the nearest troglodyte; the silvery missiles flew from his fingers, striking the

creature in its torso. The troglodyte stumbled and sank to the stone floor, but more monsters swarmed past their stricken fellow.

Narm drew his greatsword and charged forward to meet the oncoming troglodytes. Kurzen let out a dwarven war-cry and followed a step behind him, brandishing a heavy warhammer. The half-orc and the dwarf collided with the charging savages in a furious ringing of steel and iron, stemming their rush like twin battlements. The troglodytes fought in eerie silence, making not a sound other than faint hisses when they were wounded. More of the creatures veered around Narm and Kurzen, seeking to come to grips with the rest of the explorers. “Ware my fire!” Halamar shouted, then spoke the words of a spell that unleashed a torrent of flame. The furious blast burned down two or three of the monsters as they surged forward. Then the troglodytes were upon Jack and his comrades.

The monsters crowded in around the small company, spiked bludgeons rising and falling—but Narm’s sword whirled like a white razor, shearing off limbs left and right, while Kurzen’s hammer crushed scaly flesh and bone as he shrugged off the trogs’ blows in his heavy armor. Jack stabbed wildly with his rapier, ducking and dodging as the creatures pressed their attack. The foul musk seared his nostrils and clogged his throat; his eyes watered, and it was all he could do to keep his gorge in check. Halamar blasted the creatures with bolt after fiery bolt, until the sickening smell of charred flesh filled the hall. At that point Jack did lose his breakfast, but somehow he managed to wave his rapier around enough to keep any of the trogs from braining him while he was retching.

Then, as suddenly as the creatures had charged, they broke and scattered, fleeing back into the shadows. Narm leaped after the retreating monsters and cut one down from behind; Arlith’s crossbow sang again, dropping another. The ringing echoes of steel blades died away as Jack recovered from his distress and straightened up again. Nine or ten troglodytes lay dead or dying on the ground; by unspoken agreement the small company drew back from the thick reek hanging in the air where they’d fought.

“Looks like they’ve had enough for now,” Narm remarked. “Is anybody injured?”

“A dart bounced off the floor and struck my shin,” Halamar said. He peered down at his leg. “Ruined my boot, but it’s not too bad. I can walk.”

“You’re bleeding, Narm,” Arlith said. She pointed at the half-orc’s arm; there was a thin thread of blood running down to his elbow.

“It’s nothing,” the warrior said.

“Fine, then. Let me bind it up before we go on,” the halfling replied. Narm shrugged and held out his arm as Arlith retrieved a bandage from her pack.

Kurzen wandered back over to the nearest of the dead troglodytes, and frowned as he studied the body. “This fellow’s missing an eye. And so is this other one. And this one, too. I think they all are.”

Jack ventured as close as he could stand, and looked at the bodies on the ground. Sure enough, each of the troglodytes was missing its left eye. Leather patches had been sewn over the sockets. In fact, now that he looked more closely, he saw that what he’d taken for crude body decorations on their scaly hides were actually very comprehensive designs. Each troglodyte was painted with symbols of eyes, dozens of them. “How strange,” he murmured. “Some sort of tribal custom?”

“They’re weak-minded creatures, easily dominated by other monsters,” Kurzen replied. “I think it’s their way of pledging loyalty to their master.”

“What sort of master?”

Kurzen shrugged. “Hard to say. Let’s hope that our path just skirts their territory instead of leading us deeper in. I hate fighting troglodytes; can’t stand the smell of them.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Jack said. “Let us press on before any more of them show up.”

From the market hall, they turned northward again—or so Kurzen said, anyway—and followed a wide, straight passage for some distance. Suites of chambers were cut into the stone on either side,

many littered with rubble and old debris. From time to time, Jack caught a whiff of troglodyte stench hanging in the air; either some of the musk had rubbed off on his clothes or more of the foul brutes were not as far off as he'd like them. Fortunately, no more of the creatures appeared, and he began to think that perhaps they'd left the trogs behind them.

At the end of the straight passage, they came to a cloverleaf-shaped chamber with fine masonry walls and great double-doors of bronze lying wrecked in a grand doorway to the right. Dead fountains stood before the doors, revealed by the golden light of Halamar's light spell. "The Hall of Knowledge," Kurzen explained. "The city's sages and scribes gathered here. Few of my forefathers took to wizardry, but those who did were counted part of the sage's brotherhood."

"Is it worth exploring?" Jack asked, studying the darkened doorway with interest.

"It was plundered long ago," Kurzen answered. "I've heard there are hidden vaults that haven't yet been found, but the deeper reaches are guarded by magical constructs—gargoyles, golems, things of that sort. Best to leave it for another day."

The rogue's interest dimmed as soon as Kurzen mentioned guardians. "Maybe we'll have a look if the rest of the day's work comes up dry," he decided. "Carry on."

Kurzen led the band to another staircase leading down. This one descended only thirty feet or so before emerging onto a ledge in the side of a large natural crevasse. For a moment Jack thought they'd found the upper landing of the elevator to the deeper Underdark again, but he realized that this was a much smaller cavern. The stairs turned left and descended along the sheer side of the crevasse; the dwarf guide paused to scan the stalactites hanging overhead carefully before continuing down the stairs. Shadows thrown by Halamar's light on the stone formations created vast, fanglike caricatures on the crevasse's rough walls. They were more than a little unnerving, and Jack was glad when they reached the bottom of the stairs and turned back into a passageway surrounded by solid stone.

“Lower your light,” Kurzen said softly to Halamar. “We’re drawing near to the temple.”

The sorcerer waved a hand over the glowing crystal at the head of his staff, dimming its brightness to little more than a small lamp. With an exchange of glances between the members of the small company, they fell silent and advanced more slowly. Ahead of them a huge stone lintel loomed out of the shadows, covered with geometric designs and the sharp-edged runes of Dwarvish writing. Cautiously they ventured beneath the doorway, finding themselves in a great antechamber or narthex between the passage they’d followed and another hallway at the opposite end. In the middle a mighty archway led into the temple proper; Jack caught a glimpse of golden tile and the shadow of mighty columns waiting beyond.

“The Temple of the Soulforger,” Kurzen said in a hushed voice. “There are grander rooms in Sarbreen, but none more sacred or more beautifully wrought. Tread these chambers with respect, my friends.”

“Well done, Kurzen,” Jack answered.

He started forward … only to catch the sudden sharp reek of troglodyte-musk and the sound of scaly feet ahead. Dozens of troglodyte warriors poured out of the arch leading to the inner temple and rushed the small party.

“Bane’s blazing bollocks! Here they come again!” shouted Narm. He ran forward to meet the monsters’ charge, brandishing his greatsword.

Kurzen followed after him, raising his shield and guarding the big fighter’s back. Halamar conjured up a great curtain of fire that momentarily stopped the wave of troglodytes from simply overrunning the company; Jack decided to stick by to the sorcerer and defend him from any close attack. In a matter of moments Jack was hard-pressed by a pair of the degenerate monsters, fending them off with thrust after thrust of his rapier. Despite the company’s aggressive defense, the sheer weight of numbers forced the adventurers back toward the hallway outside the temple narthex.

“These fellows are the same tribe as the others.” Arlith called. “Look at their eyes!”

The halfling was right, Jack noted; the troglodytes he fought wore ragged eye patches like their comrades upstairs, and were likewise painted with eye-like symbols. Ragged volleys of trog javelins flew through the air, clattering all around the company. “Fall back!” he shouted to Narm and Kurzen. “We can hold them off on the stairs outside!”

The dwarf and the half-orc gave ground grudgingly, retreating back to the narthex entrance. A blast of green fire suddenly roared in the opposite archway, incinerating a number of the troglodyte dart-throwers that were hanging back from the press. The trogs pressing in against Narm and Kurzen hesitated, risking quick glances over the shoulders and hissing at each other in their thick, rasping voices. Then another party of adventurers appeared, bursting out of the smoking opening as their own battle spilled over into the temple’s great narthex. Two of the newcomers—an elf armed with sword and wand and an armored human wearing the robes of a cleric of Tempus—instantly turned to face whatever followed them out of the opposite tunnel, while a tattooed human swordsman and a tiefling wielding a scimitar of black fire simply cut into the back ranks of the troglodytes facing Jack and his companions without even breaking stride. Silhouetted by emerald fires smoldering in the doorway, a trio of umber hulks shambled into fray, pursuing the other heroes … only to be momentarily checked as a black-haired woman in dark mail appeared and took a stand against them, her katana flashing in the greenish light.

“Jelan? No!” Jack exclaimed. “What is she doing here?” The question was rhetorical, of course: Myrkyssa Jelan was seeking the Sarkonagael after all, or she wouldn’t be on the doorstep of the Temple of the Soulforger. And that meant that either the resting place of the tome was not quite as secure as he’d believed or the Warlord had been keeping her eye on him. Jelan glanced over her shoulder, and her eyes met Jack’s for an instant before she turned back to the monsters pressing her.

Jack started to shout a warning to his comrades or to simply protest this unfair turn of events, but the troglodyte battering at him redoubled its assault, feeling the threat approaching from

behind it. Jack ducked a wild swing of its spiked club, which shattered the face of one of the figures shown in the ancient dwarven carvings that covered the walls, and riposted with a clean thrust into the troglodyte's chest. The monster hissed in agony and staggered, but as soon as Jack drew back his point, it raised its club and came on again.

"Not fair!" Jack cried. "You are supposed to fall. Can't you see that I've killed you?"

The trog lumbered ahead and swung again; Jack had no room to backpedal, so he leaped inside its swing and found himself breast-to-breast with the stinking creature. It dropped its club and seized Jack's throat with one big, scaly claw, opening its mouth impossibly wide to reveal rows of sharp, serrated teeth. Blood spumed in its throat, but the creature held Jack fast as it prepared to take his face in its jaws. In desperation Jack dropped his rapier to the floor, drawing the dagger from his belt and plunging the blade into the trog's neck just under its ear-hole. The monster shuddered and collapsed; Jack shouldered aside its body and scooped up his sword again.

The battle was absolute chaos. Troglodytes seethed back and forth between the two companies of adventurers, filling the air with their awful reek. The umber hulks chasing Jelan's group waded into the middle of it all, lashing out with their mammoth claws and scissoring their horrible mandibles with an awful clacking sound. Adventurers and troglodytes both staggered about or stood struck senseless by the mind-whelming power of the umber hulks' quadruple eyes. Others flew into blind berserk fury, lashing out at whatever was near, friend or foe.

"No amount of coin is worth this," Jack muttered. "I hereby forswear dungeon-delving forever. There must be easier ways to throw away one's life."

Kurzen went down cursing, his leg yanked out from under him by a sweep of an umber hulk's talons. The monster's next strike crumpled the dwarf's shield like tin, and the monster opened its mandibles wide to slice the dwarf in half—but it suddenly buckled in agony as Myrkyssa Jelan slashed it across its chitin-covered back.

Arlith, overcome by the power of the umber hulks' eyes, dropped her crossbow and fled the room, running off in blind panic. Half a dozen of the surviving troglodytes scattered and ran with her, some likewise confused and some simply abandoning the fight. Narm pressed forward to hack at another one of the hulks, while Halamar slung fire left and right and Jelan's mage—the elf with sword and wand—hammered darts of magical force at the umber hulk Jelan had wounded.

Jack reversed the dagger with which he'd killed the troglodyte and took aim at the umber hulk fighting Narm. His throw took the creature in one of its large, multifaceted eyes. The hulk howled with a high screech of pain until the half-orc ducked under its fumbling grasp to drive his sword through a chink in its armor. The last umber hulk abruptly wheeled and fled, trampling over a couple of troglodytes who were milling about in their confusion. Jack wheeled, looking for another foe, but the troglodytes were all dead or in retreat, as were the umber hulks. Only the two parties of adventurers still faced each other.

"Who in the Nine Hells are you fellows?" Narm demanded, facing Jelan's tiefling and his sword of ebony flames.

"The Moon Dagger Company," the tiefling snarled. "And who are you?"

"Jack Ravenwild," said Myrkyssa Jelan. She drew a small cloth from her belt to wipe the black gore from her katana, but kept her sword ready to hand as she cleaned it. "You have the infuriating habit of turning up when least expected."

"Who is this, Jack?" Kurzen asked. He was limping, but he seemed like he could still fight.

"Myrkyssa Jelan, once the Warlord of the Vast," Jack answered. He did not take his eyes off her. "And I fail to see how my presence here interferes with any business of yours, because I am simply following a design of my own. In fact, I might ask exactly what your purpose here is, Elana. What are you up to?"

"I am here for the Sarkonagael, of course," Jelan replied.

"We were here first. The book is ours."

“That remains to be seen.” She coolly surveyed Jack’s companions, taking their measure.

Jack fumed, glancing at the open archway leading to the temple. The situation was simply intolerable. Even if they agreed to retrieve the book together and split the reward, he was suddenly short half the purse he’d hoped to win with this little expedition. Or, worse yet, Jelan might have no intention of turning in the Sarkonagael for any kind of reward. She’d gotten her hands on that book once before and proceeded to employ its dark powers to create all sorts of mayhem in the city. If she still had an interest in it, Jack was certain it could be for no good reason.

To buy himself a moment to regain his composure, he met Jelan’s gaze and demanded, “How did you know it was here?”

“I arranged for the book’s location to be divined, of course.”

“Not so fast,” Jack shot back. “I am well acquainted with your peculiar condition, Elana. You are completely unaffected by magic. A diviner could do nothing to help you find the tome.”

Jelan allowed herself a small smile. “Well, in that you are correct. However, two people learn the result of a divination, do they not?”

Jack spluttered in outrage. “Why, that is unheard of! Diviners are supposed to adhere to a strict code of professional ethics respecting their clients’ confidentiality.”

“It would appear that I made Aderbleen Krestner a more convincing offer than you did,” Jelan answered. She turned and said something to the elf standing behind her … and the elf abruptly raised his wand at Jack and his companions, speaking a spell in his own language.

“On your guard!” Narm shouted, and surged forward—but at that instant a roaring wall of green fire sprang into life around Jack and his friends, ringing them where they stood. The half-orc jerked back from the searing flames with an oath; Kurzen and Arlith raised their weapons, ready to defend themselves, but Jelan and her mercenaries simply left Jack’s party trapped within the ring of flames.

“Forgive me, Jack, but I have a book to retrieve!” Jelan shouted through the roaring of the fire. “Stay where you are, and you

shouldn't be harmed. My mage Kilarnan—" the elf gave a small smile, and bowed at the mention of his name—"informs me that the flames will abate in a quarter-hour or so. I caution you not to follow me; if I have to discourage pursuit more forcefully, I'll do so without a moment's hesitation."

Jelan raised her mailed hand to her brow in a mocking salute, then motioned to her mercenaries. As Jack and his comrades watched through the flames, the Warlord wheeled and strode boldly through the gate leading to the inner temple. Her mercenaries followed after her.

"They're going to beat us to the prize," Narm snarled. "Now what?"

Jack thought quickly. His instinct was to pursue at once, wall of fire or not … but if any more monsters waited in the temple proper, perhaps it would be better to let Jelan and her followers take their measure first. "Halamar, do you have a way to protect us against the flames?"

Halamar, the fire-sorcerer, gave a low laugh. "Trust me, fire is the least of my concerns. We can exit whenever we like."

"And Arlith is still outside," Kurzen observed. "If Halamar can protect us against the elf's magic, then what are we waiting for? Let's get out of this infernal trap. I mean to have a word or two with that so-called warlord."

Jack raised his hand, motioning for patience. "Not yet, friend Kurzen," he said. "Let Jelan find out what dangers wait in the temple. When she returns this way, it will seem that we are caught perfectly in her wizard's cage … but we'll simply be waiting to ambush her and take back our book."

Kurzen ran his hand over his short-cropped hair and nodded. "I like it," he decided. "Do we kill them, or just teach them a lesson they won't soon forget?"

"I want the book, but I am not sure that I'm prepared to murder for it," Jack replied. "Spare them if you can." He was trying to become respectable, after all, and while the authorities might not make much of rival companies brawling in the dungeons below the city, deaths tended to invite official interest of the sort Jack didn't

want. He sheathed his rapier and dropped his pack from his shoulders to the flagstones, seating himself on the ground. He was rapidly becoming aware of a dozen small aches, pains, and injuries that he hadn't noticed in the heat of the fighting; a brief respite seemed in order. "Rest now. They'll be out soon enough."

Jack drank deeply from his waterflask, then bandaged a nasty gouge just above his left boot where the spike of a troglodyte's club had missed crushing his shinbone by a whisker. The emerald flames continued to dance and crackle around the small company; inside the circle it was growing uncomfortably warm, and perspiration gleamed on each face. Narm and Kurzen talked quietly as they drank from their own flasks, weighing the best strategy for taking down the Moon Daggers quickly. The minutes dragged on, and still Jelan's party did not appear; Jack hoped that meant they were busy sorting through an immense pile of loot and hadn't simply found the book and made their exit through some other passageway on the far side of the temple.

The mage Halamar came and sat down beside Jack, bringing his pipe out of his robes. "Is this truly the Myrkyssa Jelan of legend that we are facing?" he asked.

"That is the very Myrkyssa Jelan you have just met," Jack said. "She, and I, were magically imprisoned for the last century, and released only a few tendays ago."

"Astonishing. I thought she was only a myth, a legend. No one could do the things she is said to have done."

"You don't know her as well as I do," Jack said glumly. He liked their chances of catching Jelan off guard … but that woman was damnably competent. He didn't care for the idea of crossing swords with her again. "Listen, my friend: When we move against the Warlord's company, deal with her wizard if you can. No spell of yours will have any affect at all on Jelan herself. She is completely immune to magic."

"So that much of the legend is true," Halamar mused. He fell silent for a moment, frowning in thought.

At that moment Kurzen suddenly scrambled upright and pointed back at the doorway leading from the hall into the narthex. “Gods have mercy!” he cried. “It’s a beholder!”

Jack leaped to his feet and whirled to look back the way they had come. A great, spherical shape easily eight or nine feet across floated slowly into the temple narthex. Writhing eyestalks crowned its upper surface, and its single central eye glared at the ring of emerald flames and the explorers waiting inside. Behind the monster more troglodytes slunk along, cringing and hissing to the eye-tyrant.

“Ahhh,” the beholder gurgled in its thick voice. “Here are the cruel ones who killed our servants and defiled our lair. We are not pleased with them. Do they think to hide from us within their magic? They are mistaken. Which of the ten dooms at our command do they deserve, we wonder?”

“Now I understand—the troglodytes maim themselves to show devotion to their master,” Narm remarked. He sighed and raised his sword into a guard position. “Eye tyrant, indeed. Well, with luck we will die quickly.”

That seemed like a poor aspiration to Jack. He wasn’t sure exactly what the beholder’s ten eye-rays did, but he didn’t care to find out. He glanced about the room, searching for a way out, then sudden inspiration struck him. “Wait!” he cried to the monster. “Wait, oh magnificent master. We are only lost travelers. The true defilers—your enemies and ours—have passed into the temple proper. We have no quarrel with you!” Behind him he felt Kurzen and the others exchanging wary glances, but they were clever enough to keep silent.

The beholder paused, studying Jack with several of its eyes. “Our servants are certain that your pitiful company slaughtered them with abandon.”

“A terrible misunderstanding, your spherical majesty,” Jack answered. “Ask your servants if there were not others besides our company who caused you even greater injury.” He pointed to the archway leading into the temple. “While we bandy words in this antechamber, they are already pillaging your treasures.”

The creature diverted several of its eyes to its troglodyte minions and rumbled a question in their language. Most of its eyes remained firmly trained on Jack and his company. The troglodytes seemed agitated to Jack, and he thought he caught a whiff of their horrible stink even from across the room. What manner of monster willingly accepted troglodytes into its service, he wondered. Clearly one that possessed little or no sense of smell.

"Do you really believe this will work?" Kurzen asked in a low voice.

"We will persuade the beholder that its true enemy is Jelan and her company, and wait while the creature chases them off or is destroyed in the attempt to remove them from the temple," said Jack. He could sense the possibilities realigning even as he spoke, and had to hide a grin of satisfaction at the turn of events. "Regardless of whether Jelan and her sellswords or the beholder and its minions triumph, the winning side will doubtless be weakened, and our position correspondingly improved."

"And if the creature is not dissuaded from attacking us?" the dwarf continued.

"Confidence, friend Kurzen, confidence. This is the oldest ploy in the book." Jack nodded at the beholder. "See, the creature concludes its deliberations."

The beholder drifted a little closer, having finished its discussion with its minions. "The issue is decided," it rumbled. "There is no egress from the temple. We will destroy you first, and then deal with the intruders within."

"Ah, damn it," Narm muttered.

The beholder fixed its great central eye on Jack and his companions. There was a strange silvery flash around its huge red iris … and on the instant the wall of dancing green fire surrounding the company vanished, snuffed out by the antimagic of the monster's gaze. "Go, loyal minions," it burbled to its troglodytes. "Slay them all, but do not spoil the eyes."

"New plan!" Jack cried. "Follow me! We'll lead them to Jelan and make this her fight, too." He spun on his heel and ran with all his speed for the archway leading into the temple proper.

Narm, Kurzen, and Halamar cursed and swore, but they ran after Jack as the trogs' javelins hissed through the air around them. Arlith darted out of the shadows at the far end of the hall and joined them as they fled. Without a word the beholder's servants surged forward, charging after the company, while the monster suddenly shut its central eye and lashed out with a half dozen ravening beams of magical energy from its twisting eyestalks. A green ray smote Kurzen on his shield, spreading a crackling verdant field over the wood and metal. With a curse, the dwarf flung away his warboard, which disintegrated before it reached the ground. A thin bluish ray intended for Narm was intercepted by a hapless troglodyte who ran into its path; the creature took three more steps before its skin grayed and it petrified in mid-stride.

Jack felt himself seized by an unseen force and lifted off his feet. A golden ray held him transfixed in some sort of telekinetic grip. He kicked and struggled to no avail before the beholder contemptuously flung him across the room. Jack hit the wall with enough force to knock him senseless for a moment, sliding to the floor with his back and skull aching and his ears ringing. He came back to himself just as a troglodyte reached him and raised its club to dash out his brains. In sheer panic Jack scrambled backward on his posterior, the troglodyte bounding and hissing after him, before he found his feet and dashed into the great temple beyond the arch.

The Temple of the Soulforger was almost exactly as he had seen it in the crystal ball of Aderbleen Krestner. Lustrous yellow marble gleamed beneath his feet; pillars of red marble carved in the shape of dwarf warriors towered over him. Ramshackle bookshelves covered with old tomes, scrolls, and various baubles and junk were arranged haphazardly in the great chamber, clearly the addition of the temple's current tenants and not the original dwarf artisans. Jelan and her companions—the tiefling blacksword, the elf mage, the priest of Tempus, and the warrior with the tattoos—were scattered about the room, searching through the clutter.

Myrkyssa Jelan caught sight of Jack at once, and her face darkened. "You simply do not know when to leave well enough

alone, do you?" she snapped. She drew her katana and advanced on Jack as he skidded to a halt in the middle of the temple chamber.

"Elana, there is something you ought to know," Jack cried. At that very moment his comrades, the pursuing troglodytes, and the terrible round shape of the beholder all spilled into the temple through the archway from the narthex. The monster's eye-rays flashed and sizzled in the air, throwing polychromatic flashes of light across the room.

"The beholder has returned!" shouted the tattooed swordsman beside Jelan—one of the most ridiculous statements of the obvious Jack had heard in some time.

Jelan did not hesitate a moment. "Slay the beholder," she told her mercenaries. "We'll deal with the others afterward."

The Warlord's mercenaries ran up to join the battle. A furious skirmish developed just inside the temple as the two companies of adventurers battled the beholder and its minions. Narm stormed toward the beholder with his greatsword, only to be blocked by troglodytes leaping to their master's defense. Halamar scorched several troglodytes and turned his fire against the beholder, but the monster fixed its central eye on him and the sorcerer's spells abruptly died. Eyes wide in sudden alarm, the young pyromancer seized his staff in both hands to fend off the rush of two more troglodytes trying to cut him down while his magic was suppressed. Arlith, skulking in the shadows, shot the beholder with a crossbow bolt that struck it dead-center on its side; the monster gurgled in pain and lashed out with a purple eye-ray that swept over the halfling. Deep cuts suddenly appeared across her face and hands, streaming blood; Arlith cried out and collapsed, cradling her useless hands. Another eye-ray, this one pure black, reached out to flick the tiefling with the ebony sword. The devil-kin warrior simply dropped where he stood, crumpling like a puppet with its strings cut, but the elf Kilarnan loosed a lightning bolt that crashed through two or three more trogs before blasting the beholder from its other side. The monster roared again and spun to fix its antimagic eye on the mage.

“Close in on the thing!” Kurzen shouted. “Don’t give it a chance to pick us off with its eyes.” The dwarf battled closer, shouldering his way through the troglodytes as he followed his own advice.

Jack wondered if it had been such a good idea after all to try to combine with Jelan’s company against the beholder. Flight might have been the better option … but they were committed now. He conjured his force-darts and pounded the beholder’s flank, only to be seized by the telekinesis-ray once again and flung into the nearest pillar. The impact drove the breath from his lungs, and he wheezed for air as he staggered to his feet once again, bruised and battered. Then Jelan charged into the fray with a piercing war-cry, deliberately trying to attract the monster’s attention. The beholder flicked its ebony ray at her, which struck her in the center of her breastplate and had no effect. The Warlord did not even break her stride; the beholder glowered and shifted two more of its eye-rays onto her, to no avail—her peculiar immunity meant that she had nothing to fear from the monster’s magical eyes. She threaded her way through the troglodytes, and leaped high to slash the beholder across its crooked fanged mouth. Blood spurted from its slashed lips, and sheared-off teeth scattered across the floor. “Keep after it!” she shouted.

“We will destroy you all!” the beholder roared in anger. “Death is the kindest of our retributions, foolish humans!” It raised itself higher in the air and rotated, spinning away from Jelan. The creature was a fast learner; having determined that its eye rays could not affect the mailed swordswoman, it changed its tactics. With its telekinesis-ray it grabbed the Tempus-priest from where he stood and flung him headlong into Jelan, using him like a living battering ram to drive her away. Then its disintegration-ray flashed at the marble floor beneath Jelan and her companion, vaporizing the ancient dwarf stonework in a sinister green flash to instantly dig a pit. Jelan and the cleric dropped out of sight before they could regain their feet.

The swordsman with the tattoos snatched a handaxe from his belt and threw it at the beholder, striking the monster in its central eye. Dark gore splattered, and the creature wailed in agony, contracting

the heavy lid and reeling away. It struck back with a ray from one of its eyestalks; Jack didn't see what the beholder did next, but the warrior suddenly gibbered in panic and bolted in response, throwing away his shield as he fled the temple. However, the beholder could no longer suppress the magic of the elf mage and the sorcerer Halamar; both lashed at the monster with furious battle spells. Jack spied a troglodyte lining up on Halamar with a heavy dart, and he dashed across the fray to make a running lunge at the monster. He skewered the creature through its back; it screeched and dropped its javelin. Jack turned to face the beholder, wondering how he could come to grips with the creature without being lashed by its fierce eye-rays.

Behind the creature, Kurzen momentarily found himself in the clear. The dwarf reached down and seized one of the heavy darts the troglodytes carried, wound up, and let it fly with all his strength. The heavy missile found a seam in the monster's chitinous armor, sinking deep into its back and striking something vital. The beholder's eyestalks flailed wildly, and it began to sink to the ground. Narm leaped forward and drove his greatsword deep into its bloated body. The eyestalks abruptly went slack, and the monster hung motionless in the air, dripping gore from its wounds. The few surviving troglodytes hissed and wailed in despair, abandoning the fight as they scattered and ran.

"Thank the gods," Halamar panted. "It's dead."

The Temple of the Soulforger fell silent. Narm and Kurzen clasped arms, flashing grins of relief and victory at each other. Jack clapped the fire-mage on the shoulder before stooping to clean his rapier on the ragged hides worn by the last troglodyte he'd killed. Then he limped over to the edge of the pit the beholder had excavated for Jelan and peeked over the edge cautiously. The bottom was easily eleven or twelve feet down, and the sides were as smooth as polished glass. The priest of Tempus was sprawled on his back, unconscious, while Myrkyssa Jelan gazed back up at him.

"I take it the fight is won?" she asked.

"The beholder is dead," Jack answered. "Without their master, the troglodytes have lost heart."

“I see.” Jelan folded her arms. “It seems the day belongs to you, Jack. What do you intend to do?”

“I think I’ll have a look around. One never knows what one might find.”

The swordswoman grimaced. “My comrade Wulfrad is seriously injured. I hope you do not intend to simply leave us here.”

Jack offered a small smile. “My dear Elana, I would do no such thing. Of course we will help you out of your predicament, just as soon as I secure my prize.”

He straightened up and turned his attention to the elf Kilarnan, the only one of the Warlord’s followers still on his feet. Narm and Arlith faced the mage, not quite threatening him but not turning their backs on him, either. Jack approached and gave the elf a small bow. “I have no particular wish to be unpleasant,” he said, “but as I see it, I and my companions outnumber you four to one. We hold the field, so we will take our pick of the spoils. Stand aside, and as soon as we are finished, you may retrieve your employer and go about your business.”

Kilarnan swept the temple with his eyes, searching for some sign that he was not alone, then grimaced. “I have little choice,” he said. “I will wait.”

“Friend Narm, keep Kilarnan company,” Jack said. “The rest of us will have a look around and see what we can find.”

“Best not to dawdle,” Narm said. “The troglodytes may have friends nearby.”

Jack turned and faced the great anvil-shaped altar at the far end of the room, orienting himself in the chamber. When he’d seen the Sarkonagael in the crystal ball, it had been lying on a work table standing against a wall … he paced over to the shelves and benches along the nearest side of the temple chamber, looking for a table of about the right size and orientation. “What was the beholder’s interest in all these old books?” he wondered aloud as he looked. Was it searching for some specific knowledge, or was it simply interested in any sort of lore it could get its hands—or more accurately, its minions’ hands—on?

He spied a heap of books piled on one end of a large table that struck him as familiar, and hurried over to investigate. There, lying more or less in plain sight, lay the black leather and silver lettering of the Sarkonagael. Only the vast piles of clutter around it concealed the book. Carefully Jack picked it up, examining it closely before opening it for a peek within. It was exactly as he remembered, and he grinned to himself. “How curious a fate to steal the same book twice,” he said.

“Is that it, Jack?” Halamar asked.

“Indeed it is,” Jack replied. He quickly scooped it into his pack, and looked around at the rest of the beholder’s clutter. “Let’s have a good look around. The beholder has no further use for any of its treasures, after all.”

While Kurzen, Arlith, and Halamar quickly searched the room, Jack returned to the edge of the pit to make sure Jelan hadn’t somehow escaped already. The Warlord was waiting where he had left her. “I have what I want,” Jack told her. “We’ll be on our way shortly.”

Jelan stood with folded arms. Her dark eyes flashed with irritation. She started to speak, then stopped herself, glaring down at the rough floor of the pit. After a moment, she regained her customary composure and raised her eyes to meet Jack’s again. “What do you intend to do with the book?” she asked.

“I have no grand designs for the Sarkonagael. The reward is sufficient for me.”

“I thought as much,” she replied. “Before you turn in the book, you should ask yourself who wants it, and why. The Sarkonagael is dangerous, as I am sure you know.”

Jack was quite familiar with the potential mayhem hidden in the tome; he’d spent a wretched tenday or so dealing with a shadow-doppelganger created by a Sarkonagael spell when he and Jelan had crossed paths the first time. A dark suspicion came to him, and he peered more closely at the swordswoman. “You aren’t the one who posted the reward, are you?”

Jelan allowed herself a small smile that did not quite reach her eyes. “No, I am not,” she answered. “But if it is merely a matter of

coin to you, then I'd be willing to pay you the five thousand crowns for the book. It is important that the Sarkonagael not fall into the wrong hands."

Kurzen trotted up beside Jack, and leaned over to look down at the pit before speaking to him. "We're done here, Jack. Best be on our way."

"Excellent," Jack replied. He glanced down at Jelan. "Your friend Kilarnan is unhurt. I'll leave him with a rope. Farewell, dear Elana."

He started to turn away, but Jelan called after him. "One more thing, Jack," she said. "You would be wise to watch out for the drow. Two days ago a party of dark elves came in search of me, with some notion of taking me back down to Tower Chûmavhraele. I discouraged them, of course, but they seemed interested in locating you, too."

"I am inclined to regard all drow with suspicion at this point," Jack remarked. He could only imagine how Myrkyssa Jelan had *discouraged* would-be captors. "I thank you for the warning, anyway. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a reward to claim."

CHAPTER NINE

The beholder's hoard was not as magnificent as the treasure Jack had once looted from the Guilder's Vault, but it was certainly a substantial addition to the expedition's returns. A dozen or more of the scrolls seemed magical, and many of the old tomes looked rare or valuable. In a back room of the Smoke Wyrm, the small company tended their injuries, divided out the coins and gemstones, made their arrangements to have the books and scrolls appraised and sold, and settled their nerves after the harrowing day with pints of the excellent Old Smoky. Perhaps inspired by the effects of the dark dwarven ale, Jack hit upon the idea of keeping the Sarkonagael safely out of sight for a few days while negotiating a higher price for its return. After all, anyone who would offer five thousand gold crowns for this book might very well offer six, or even seven; could it hurt to send word to Horthlaer House that the book was in the possession of an anonymous party who required a somewhat larger payment before parting with it? "It never hurts to ask," he decided.

Pleased with himself for devising such a simple method for increasing his gain from danger already past, Jack returned to Maldridge. He waved off Edelmon's daily correspondence and instead composed a letter containing his instructions for the counting house of Albrath, which would serve as a fine go-between with Horthlaer's. "Discretion is required," he told himself when he finished. "I will allow my agent to make inquiries at Horthlaer's without revealing my name, just in case the person seeking the Sarkonagael might consider more stringent measures to obtain the book when he discovers that the price is under negotiation. Anonymity is assured."

"What was that, sir?" Edelmon asked.

"A stroke of genius, my good man," Jack replied. "Draw me a bath, if you please."

With that important bit of business attended to, Jack indulged himself in an hour-long soak in a tub of piping hot water, after which he had Edelmon summon the physician to look after the various cuts, bruises, and sprains that he'd acquired in the dungeons of Sarbreen. By nine bells he was in his bed, from which he did not stir for the next fourteen hours. He only roused himself the next morning when Edelmon knocked on the bedchamber door and let himself in.

"Excuse me, Master Jack, but you have a guest. Lord Norwood is here to call on you." The valet studied Jack's groggy visage and added, "Shall I tell him you are indisposed?"

Jack sat up and ran his hand through his hair.

"Norwood here?" he muttered. "What does he want with me at this indecent hour?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but it's already struck eleven bells this morning."

It seemed like it would be a bad idea to turn away his benefactor out of sheer indolence. Jack allowed himself one long yawn, and gave the old valet a nod. "In that case I'll be right down," he said. "And ask the cook to begin breakfast; I'm famished." Edelmon bowed and withdrew; the rogue climbed out of his bed, dressed himself quickly from his fine new wardrobe, and took a moment to drag a comb through his hair. In a matter of minutes Jack trotted down the grand zalantar-wood staircase to the front hall.

Marden Norwood waited for him there, with an armsman in Norwood colors standing unobtrusively two steps behind the lord. "Ah, there you are, Jack," Norwood said. He studied Jack's face for a moment, and snorted softly to himself. "My apologies if I woke you early."

"Think nothing of it," Jack replied with a wave of his hand. "I intend to breakfast shortly; would you care to join me, Lord Marden?"

"No, thank you. I won't be staying long." The nobleman's customary geniality was nowhere in sight; his silver brows brooded low over his eyes, and his mouth was set in an even frown. "You might say that this is not a social call."

This does not look promising at all, Jack decided. He suddenly wished that he'd feigned illness and had Edelmon send away Seila's father. Still, there was nothing for it but to play out the scene; he could hardly avoid it now. He clicked his heels and bowed. "I am at your disposal, my lord."

"Let us adjourn to your study," Norwood said. He held out a hand, indicating the adjoining room with its katana-holed door. Jack glumly led the way to the study, and waited by the door until Norwood entered. "Have a seat," the lord said, motioning toward a chair by the hearth as if it were his study and not Jack's they were entering. Jack took the offered seat; Norwood took the chair opposite. He studied Jack long and carefully, a look of keen thoughtfulness etched on his features. Jack didn't like it at all.

Finally Jack couldn't stand the waiting any longer. "You have something you wished to discuss with me?" he prompted.

"I do," Norwood replied. "You may not be surprised to learn that I have recently conducted some inquiries into the estate, family, and titles of the landsgraves of Wildhame. Do you know what I found, Jack?"

"My home and family survived the Spellplague?" Jack asked with an artfully hopeful note in his voice.

Norwood smiled and shook his head. "Not exactly. I learned that Hlath was never ruled by a king. The ruler of the city in the years before the Spellplague was Lord Darvis Shennelm, High Councilor of the city's Council of Lords, yet you claimed your family had a home quite near the king's palace. Clearly, you never lived anywhere near Hlath or you would have known that. Moreover, I have determined to my satisfaction that there never existed any holdings or lords by the name of Wildhame in Hlath, the lands nearby, or any realm in the Vilhon Reach." His expression darkened, and he leaned forward to point an accusing finger at Jack. "You, sir, are an imposter, a fraud, laying claim to a place and station not your own. Who are you, really? The time for deceptions is at an end."

Jack mustered every ounce of wounded dignity and earnestness he could summon. "Your suspicions are ill-founded, sir," he said

sharply. “Clearly your research is incomplete, or quite possibly the records of my home and family simply have not survived to this day. Your library is admirable, but it is hardly the summation of all there is to know about vanished Chondath or its proud old families.”

“Oh, I did not rely on my library alone,” Norwood replied. “The day I received word of your arrival on my doorstep at Seila’s side, I engaged the services of three different sages in two cities. When they reported failure, I hired diviners to determine the truthfulness of your claims. It has been a very expensive undertaking, I might add; as generous as I was with your reward, I have spent even more to plumb the truthfulness of your claims. You are not Jaer Kell Wildhame, because no such person has ever existed. So, I repeat my question: Who are you?”

“I am afraid you spent your coin imprudently, Lord Norwood. Your sages and diviners have failed you. Is it so hard to believe that a small estate erased a hundred years ago might escape the notice of both mundane and magical researchers?” Jack straightened in his chair, and allowed a little temper to show in the set of his mouth and the timbre of his voice. “I am who I say I am.”

“I thought that you might say that,” Norwood remarked. He leaned back in his chair, fixing Jack with his stern gaze. “Very well, then; here is how I will proceed. Since the available evidence indicates that you are a liar and a scoundrel, I will treat you as the fraud that you are unless you somehow produce irrefutable evidence to support your claims. In other words, sir, the burden of proof is on you. Demonstrate the validity of your claims, or retract them at once.”

“Fine,” Jack answered. “Your resources may have failed you, but I am certain I will have better luck. I will find the proof you require, Lord Norwood … although I must say it will be a long time before I forget the distrust you have shown me. Perhaps it would be best if we concluded this conversation at once, before either of us says something regrettable.” He stood and motioned to the door.

“As you wish.” Norwood straightened slowly and tugged at his tunic, settling the fit to his satisfaction. The old lord walked to the

study door, paused as he noted the sword-hole in the panel, then turned to speak again. “I am not quite finished, Jack. I care little what you call yourself or who you inveigle with your lies. I might be inclined to overlook the matter, if you had no dealings with me or mine. After all, you did render me an invaluable service by rescuing Seila from the drow, regardless of your motives for doing it. But you clearly presume to trade upon my name and toy with the affections of my only daughter, and that cannot stand. Keep the reward I offered for Seila’s return; I would have given it freely to any man for bringing her back to me. But I expect you to vacate Maldridge by the end of the tenday. And—let me be very clear about this—you are *not* to see Seila again, or communicate with her in any way. In fact, it might be better if you removed yourself from Raven’s Bluff altogether.”

“You can’t do that!” Jack spluttered in outrage.

Marden Norwood smiled, but his eyes remained as hard as flint. “I am a very influential man in this city, my young friend. Believe me, you would be amazed at the things I can do if I decide they must be done. If you defy me, I will arrange for a whole world of troubles to descend upon you; do not try my patience any further. Good day, sir.”

Jack considered any number of retorts, rebuttals, or rejoinders, and somehow found himself doubting that anything he said would help his case. He instead drew himself up, squared his shoulders, and simply said, “You misjudge me, my lord.”

Norwood did not bother to reply. He strode out the front door, with his guard a step behind him; Jack watched the old noble climb up into his waiting coach in the street outside before Edelmon closed the door behind him.

Jack muttered a vile oath under his breath and gave the study door a good kick. “This is a catastrophe,” he snarled.

Edelmon cleared his throat by the front door. “To what address shall I forward your things, sir?” he asked.

“Nowhere!” Jack shouted, waving his arms. “I have until the end of the tenday, and I’ll be damned if I vacate the premises an hour before I must.”

“I can make inquiries with various property owners and reliable brokers, if you like,” the valet said. “Or, if you prefer, I can obtain sailing schedules and book your passage. Travel broadens the mind, or so it is said.”

Enough was enough. “Is my breakfast ready yet?” Jack demanded.

“I believe the cook has just set it out in the dining room, sir.”

“Then that is all, Edelmon.” Jack stormed off to the dining room, where he found his customary breakfast awaiting him, and threw himself into his seat. Somehow he had lost his appetite, and he glared at the plate of eggs and ham in front of him for a long moment before taking a piece of toast and buttering it angrily. His prospects were not all that poor, really; he still had several thousand crowns of Norwood’s reward to his name, and of course turning in the Sarkonagael could easily double his fortune. Giving up Maldridge would not hurt too badly, although there was no denying that he had become rather fond of the place and enjoyed the lifestyle of a gentleman of leisure. A couple of thousand crowns would buy him a fine house in a good neighborhood, along with a servant or two, although of course it would not be so grand as the manor he now inhabited. No, the most galling development was clearly Norwood’s severance of any possible continuation of his association with Seila. Setting aside his deeper designs on the Norwood fortune, he *liked* Seila and wasn’t ready to give her up without a fight.

He gave a cursory glance to the correspondence waiting for his attention, wondering if he should even bother to accept any more invitations. How long would it take for the well-heeled folk of Raven’s Bluff to drop him once word got around that he was no longer welcome at Norwood Manor? Or would Marden Norwood simply denounce him as a fraud outright, in which case not only would the nobility have nothing to do with him but he might actually find himself the object of the civic authorities’ attention? Was that what Norwood meant by a world of troubles, or was the old lord willing to employ sterner measures to get his point across?

“I might have to take up a life abroad whether I want to or not,” Jack sighed.

He spent the next hour pushing his breakfast around on his plate and trying to distract himself with the morning's handbills, to no avail. So it was that he found himself slumped in his chair, staring straight ahead with his head in his hand, when Edelmon knocked and entered the room.

"Oh, what now?" Jack said.

"A young lady is here to see you, Master Jack," the valet replied.

Jack sat up sharply. "Is she armed?" Myrkyssa Jelan was almost certainly out of Sarbreen by now, and although he was reasonably sure that she would respect the unspoken truce by which he'd left her with the means to make her escape, there was always the chance that she entertained a different view of the business in the Temple of the Soulforger. He'd beat her to the prize fair and square, but perhaps she was a sore loser. An angry Myrkyssa Jelan was about the last thing he cared to see on his doorstep at the moment.

"Ah, no. I should have been more specific. Lady Seila Norwood is at the door."

"I was wrong," Jack muttered. "*That* is the last person I wanted to see now. She is doubtless here to tell me exactly what she thinks of me before storming off, never to be seen again."

"Shall I tell her that you are—"

"No, damn it." the rogue answered. Seila was a more generous soul than her father; she might see things differently than he did. And even if she didn't, at the very least Jack wanted to make sure she heard his side of the story, too. "I might as well have done with this."

He dropped his napkin on the table and marched out to the foyer to meet his fate, steeling himself for the worst. Seila waited for him there, pacing in a small circle exactly where her father had stood an hour before. She looked splendid in a burgundy dress; when he entered the room, she simply looked up and met his gaze for a long moment before saying softly, "Oh, Jack. What a mess you've made of things. Why in the world would you make up a noble title? In some lands you'd be executed for that sort of chicanery."

Jack briefly considered bluffing his way through the conversation by insisting on the veracity of his claim, but reluctantly discarded

the ploy. He might be able to keep Seila in doubt for a time, but sooner or later she would have to decide whether she believed him or her own father. Worse yet, if he tried to carry on the claim and failed to win her over with his a show of earnestness, she would be through with him. No, it was better to put the best face on the matter that he could, and hope that her affection for him was strong enough for her to set aside his misbehavior.

"I am sorry," he said at last. "I never meant for the whole thing to go so far. It seemed like a harmless enough game when we were both prisoners of the drow, and when we reached the safety of your father's manor, I suppose I just didn't know how to set the story straight."

Seila folded her arms and fixed a stern gaze on him. "All you had to do was tell the truth. Was it that difficult, Jack? And is that even your name?"

"Yes, Jack is my name; Jack Ravenwild." He hung his head in a show of shame, thinking quickly as he assembled his play. "Seila, I have never met anyone like you," he began with a note of uncertainty. "Men of my station do not associate with ladies of yours. I was afraid that once the truth was known, I would be shown the door, and I might never see you again."

"Do you think I am so ungrateful that I would allow my father to treat you like a servant when I owe you my life? Is that really what you think of me, Jack?"

"It isn't *your* gratitude that I doubted, Seila. Tell me truly: If I had admitted my common birth, would we have been allowed to spend so much time together in the last couple of tendays?" Seila did not answer immediately; Jack pressed his point. "You told me the day of the party that your father intends for you to marry well. How long would he have tolerated the presence of a … distraction … like me?"

Seila sighed and looked away. "Not for long," she admitted. "But if my hand is my father's to give away, then my heart is my own, and I am not quite finished with you, Jack Ravenwild."

Jack's heart gave a small skip, and he smiled. "I am pleased to hear you say so, but I'm afraid your father's instructions to me were

very clear on that point."

"Well, he might not have the final say in the matter." Seila turned to Jack, then took two brisk steps and kissed him very soundly. Jack found his arms circling her slender waist as he drank deeply of her perfect lips until she gently reached up and pushed him back to arm's length. "For now, do as my father says," she said. "I will see what I can do to bring him around. We can still correspond with care, and we may find occasion to see each other. In fact, I hope I can persuade you to join me at the opera tomorrow night."

"The opera?" Jack asked.

"Tomorrow night, a new production opens at the Rundelstone Opera House; the Ravenaar Opera is playing *The Fall of Myth Drannor*," Seila explained. "Everybody who is anybody will attend the opening, of course. My family has a box with a good vantage; you'll see half the nobles of Raven's Bluff in one sitting."

"Ah, you hope that I will spot Fetterfist for you."

"It's the only thing I can think of that might win you some small credit with my father at the moment."

Jack smiled. "And I thought you intended to defy your father simply for the pleasure of my company."

"Well, I think that with some care my father won't have any idea that I am defying him. He has other business tomorrow and won't be in attendance, but he will not be surprised if I go in the company of a friend or two. The box is private enough that no one else should notice exactly who is with me."

"I have ways of not being seen when it suits me," Jack replied. "Perhaps I could go in the guise of one of your many suitors—say, that Skyhawk fellow?"

Seila laughed and shook her head. "For Leira's sake, no! He is very likely to be there, and might notice himself sitting with me. Some other guise, if you please."

"Very well, I should be delighted to attend the opera." Perhaps they'd spot the slaver, and perhaps not, but it certainly wouldn't hurt his cause to spend several hours at Seila Norwood's side. "Given the circumstances, I suppose I should just meet you in your box at the Rundelstone?"

“That would seem to be for the best. The show begins at eight.”

“Excellent! I am looking forward to it already, and I am sure we will expose that dastardly felon before the end of the first act.” Jack took her hand and raised it to his lips. “Tomorrow night, then.”

“Tomorrow night,” Seila said. She leaned forward to kiss him again, lightly this time, and then slipped out the front door.



Deciding to heed Seila’s advice and demonstrate attention to Lord Norwood’s requirements, Jack spent most of the rainy afternoon looking into alternative lodgings. It was possible, after all, that given time Seila might succeed in moderating her father’s stern stance against him, although it was clear that the days of posing as the Landsgrave Jaer Kell Wildhame were at an end. Somehow Jack doubted that Norwood would ever countenance any relationship between him and Seila, but at least he was still in the game; after all, the old fellow might be struck down by a runaway carriage tomorrow, and then Jack’s failure to come clean under Norwood’s accusations might not reach anyone else’s ears.

Unfortunately, a long afternoon of eliminating one genteel neighborhood after another from his prospects as he compared asking prices for comfortable homes to the state of his accounts left him footsore and discouraged. Nothing in Tentowers or Swordspoint seemed likely to fit his budget; Sixstar and Mortonbrace held possibilities, but they could hardly be considered trendy districts. “If I were not a generous and forgiving soul I might at this very moment be engaged in arranging a coach accident,” Jack grumbled to himself as he roamed the streets. “Then I wouldn’t need to abandon Maldridge or make unpleasant adjustments to my lifestyle.”

The Sarkonagael he kept in a plain leather satchel under his left arm. He didn’t want to leave it out of his sight—Myrkyssa Jelan clearly knew where he lived and might be able to have Aderbleen divine its location again if he left it somewhere else. Several times throughout the afternoon he considered turning in the book immediately to get his hands on more coin sooner rather than later,

but he checked the impulse: There was no hurry to part company with the prize until he'd seen whether he could drive up the price with some shrewd bargaining. No, the best thing to do was to secure good temporary quarters with the funds he already had in hand, simply to provide himself a place to keep his just-purchased wardrobe and personal belongings.

Jack turned his attention to the best inns and boarding-houses he could find, with little more success. Finally the thought occurred to him that he'd recently made a good impression on many new friends among the lower nobility; perhaps he could quietly let slip the news that Maldridge was soon to be renovated and that he was seeking a place to stay for a little while. Some kindly old matron among Lady Moonbrace's friends or perhaps an acquaintance of the Flermeers would certainly step forward to extend hospitality to a person of his current celebrity. Jack decided that he liked that plan much better than parting with his own good gold … but that, of course, depended on Marden Norwood issuing no public denouncement of him. So far Seila's father seemed disinclined to do so, perhaps because he'd offered Jack the chance to leave quietly with the coin he already had, but who could say what might happen when Norwood discovered Seila's defiance?

Determined to put his new plan into action at once, Jack returned to Maldridge to write a few properly worded notes to some of his new friends among the well-to-do. He deflected Edelmon's none-too-subtle inquiries about when exactly he would be vacating the premises and enjoyed another good dinner, even if it was unquestionably more ordinary fare than he'd enjoyed before Norwood's unfortunate visit. "It appears the staff has determined there is no longer any particular reason to curry my good favor," he muttered to himself.

He set straight to his correspondence after finishing his supper, and became so absorbed in the task that he lost track of the hour. It wasn't until he absently noted the distant gongs echoing through the city streets as the various temples marked seven bells of the evening that sudden recollection struck him: He'd promised to meet

Master Tarandor of the Wizards' Guild in Bitterstone at this very hour.

"Selûne's silver teats!" he cried, sitting upright. Whatever business Tarandor had with him, no good could come of missing the appointment. He dashed for the door, slinging his satchel over his shoulder and throwing on a long cloak against the evening chill, and then hurried out. He took a moment to secure his cloak and consider the speediest route; as he did so he thought he saw a black-cloaked figure watching him from an alleyway across the street. Jack peered into the evening gloom, but the cloaked watcher was gone. Had he seen a hint of ruby-colored eyes and ebony skin? Or had he imagined something in the shadows of the alley?

"The thrice-damned dark elves have me starting at shadows," he muttered. At least the afternoon's rains had lifted, although a thick mist was gathering in the seaward districts; the night would be foggy indeed. Putting the uncertain sighting behind him, Jack crossed over to Moorland and hurried south all the way to Rhabie Promenade at a pace that was more than half a run, then followed the wide boulevard through Altarside and the Anvil into the harbor district of Bitterstone. Good luck to any skulking drow trying to dog his footsteps!

He managed the distance in a quarter-hour, but then once he was in the proper neighborhood the combination of thickening fog and poorly remembered directions delayed him further; he actually walked past the warehouse of Mumfort and Company twice before he realized that that was the place he was looking for. With some chagrin, he went up and knocked firmly at the door. "Master Tarandor?" he called.

He heard footsteps on a creaking wooden floor, then Tarandor Delhame opened the door. "Ah, good evening, Master Ravenwild," the lean wizard said. Jack thought his smile seemed a little forced, but then again, he'd kept the fellow waiting almost half an hour. "I was beginning to fear that you'd forgotten our appointment."

"In truth, I did not remember it until I heard seven bells struck. Please excuse my tardiness."

“No matter,” the mage replied. “You are here now; we can proceed.” He stepped back and invited Jack inside with a slight bow; Jack nodded and entered the warehouse. Stacks of wooden crates and small wooden casks lined the walls; several lanterns hanging from posts cast a warm yellow illumination over the otherwise dim and dusty interior. Jack saw that a large space had been cleared in the center of the room. A work table littered with parchment, old tomes, and a couple of curious green glass bottles stood to one side of the room, while a large object of some sort stood covered by a shapeless sheet of canvas in the center of the open area. Several more wizards—a plump young man with a patchy beard, a fetching elven woman with greenish-gold hair, and a Calishite man who wore a fez turned and bowed to Jack as he made his entrance.

“Good evening,” Jack said to the others, enjoying the air of professional camaraderie. “So how might I be of assistance? I confess this is all very mysterious.”

“Perhaps it might be easiest to show you,” Tarandor answered. “Attend, sir.” He walked up to the covered object in the middle of the room, and glanced at the other wizards. Then he took hold of a cord or lanyard hidden under the canvas and gave it a firm yank. In the corner of his eye Jack noticed the other mages in the room averting their faces as Tarandor turned his back fully on the falling canvas shroud. Beneath the canvas there stood a battered old statue of no particular quality, the sort of thing one might have found gathering bird-nests in any poor nobleman’s garden—but the face had been carefully chiseled into a flat, mirror-smooth surface, and there glowed a complex mystic rune. Jack’s eyes fell on the symbol before he even realized that he was looking at it, and a great burst of greenish light sprang from the device. A sudden dizziness swept over him, as the warehouse seemed to whirl away into darkness and shadow and the most peculiar sensation of motion in all directions at once overcame him.

He fell to his hands and knees, and found cool sand underneath him instead of the dusty old floorboards of the warehouse. Jack scrambled back to his feet and whirled around, astounded by his

new surroundings. He seemed to be in a small, spherical room made of dark greenish glass. The walls curved inward to meet the low ceiling, which then drew away into a dark passage or flue. Beneath his feet was coarse white sand, which served to level the floor. “What is the meaning of this?” he shouted, and struck at the wall with his fist. The glass was so thick he might as well have been punching at stone.

Jack realized that he could see through the dark glass wall; outside the small chamber that held him, he could still make out the yellow lanterns hanging from the posts in the warehouse, strangely dim and distant. A vast shadow suddenly seemed to move across the wall behind him, and the room shuddered under a dull impact. The whole structure, Jack of course included, seemed to rise straight into the air. He lost his balance and sprawled to the sand again, which now slithered past his hands and knees, shifting to one side as the strange chamber tilted. Jack floundered in the rough sand, cursing … then the face of Tarandor Dethame suddenly appeared against one wall, but vastly huge, easily twice Jack’s height from peppered goatee to gleaming bald brow.

“AH, THERE YOU ARE JACK,” the monstrous visage thundered. “HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR ACCOMMODATIONS?”

“This is outrageous!” Jack shouted. “What have you done to me?”

“I HOPE YOU WILL FORGIVE ME, BUT I CAUSED YOU TO LOOK UPON A SYMBOL OF ENTRAPMENT,” Tarandor’s gigantic image answered.

Jack clapped his hands to his ears. “Cease your titanic demonstrations, Tarandor, and release me at once!”

“I REGRET THAT I CANNOT COMPLY,” Tarandor said. “AND I AM NOT TITANIC, JACK; YOU ARE SIMPLY MINUSCULE.”

Jack examined himself swiftly, looking at his hands and feet to see if they were the same distance from his eyes that they had always been. They certainly seemed to be, but of course if he had been minimalized in some way, why should he not shrink in perfect proportion? He looked back at the strange green room in which he was trapped … and suddenly he recognized the place. He was inside one of the odd green bottles that had been standing on the table

beside Tarandor when he walked into the warehouse! The wizard's spell had shrunk him to the size of a doll (and a small one at that), whisking him into the container Tarandor had prepared for him. Now the abjurer was holding him aloft by the bottle's neck, peering at him through the glass.

"What is the meaning of this villainy?" Jack demanded. "What have I done to you, Tarandor?"

"OH, THIS IS NOTHING PERSONAL, MY LITTLE FRIEND. I AM MERELY FULFILLING THE OBLIGATION LAID UPON ME BY MY FORMER MASTER, WHO INHERITED IT FROM HIS OWN MASTER, MERITHEUS OF RAVEN'S BLUFF. IT SEEMS THAT MERITHEUS LEFT STANDING INSTRUCTIONS THAT HE OR HIS APPOINTED REPRESENTATIVE WAS TO BE SUMMONED AT ONCE IF YOU ESCAPED YOUR INTERNMENT IN THE WILD MYTHAL. I WILL SIMPLY RETURN YOU TO YOUR CONFINEMENT, AND BE DONE WITH THIS WHOLE TEDIOUS BUSINESS."

"Return me to my confinement?" Jack stared at the gigantic face studying him, and his heart sank. "Do you mean to say that it was the Wizards' Guild that imprisoned me a hundred years ago? But why would they have done that? And why in the world do you believe you must imprison me again?"

"AS BEST I CAN DETERMINE THEY IMPRISONED YOU TO SUPPRESS THE MAGIC CALLED WILDFIRE, JACK—SPONTANEOUS MAGIC, APT TO SURFACE IN THE UNTRAINED, THE UNDISCIPLINED, THE UNGUIDED. MY PREDECESSOR FORESAW A GREAT CATASTROPHE DRAWING NEAR, AND REALIZED THAT TO SAFEGUARD THE CITY THE PHENOMENON OF WILDFIRE HAD TO BE CONTAINED. YOUR CONNECTION TO THE WILD MYTHAL MEANT THAT YOU WERE INSTRUMENTAL TO THE PROCESS OF CONTROLLING WILD SORCERY."

Great catastrophe? Jack wondered. That was why he had been encysted in the mythal? Jack thought back again to that last night of his former life, remembering a stroll through the damp and misty streets of the city on whatever errand he had in mind … and now his memory supplied him with one last recollection, of robed figures appearing from the shadows with wands leveled at him, a crescendo

of magic words and stunning spells. “Well, that would have been helpful to recall before now,” he muttered. He certainly would have been more careful about returning to the High House of Magic if he’d remembered that wizards waylaid him before his imprisonment.

He looked back up at the gigantic visage of the wizard and tried a different tack. “Tarandor, be reasonable! Whatever disaster your predecessors foresaw for me clearly was anticipated to occur in my natural lifetime. We are at least forty or fifty years past that span; justified or not, their concerns have been mitigated. There is no point in confining me now!”

“YOU ARE PROBABLY CORRECT. HOWEVER, MY INSTRUCTIONS PERMIT ME NO DISCRETION. DOUBTLESS IT IS FOR THE BEST.”

“For the best?” Jack snarled in anger and pummeled the unyielding green glass of the bottle. “You intend to confine me until the Night Serpent devours the world, and you tell me it is for the best? The obstinacy! The stupidity!”

“I, TOO, FIND THIS INCONVENIENT,” Tarandor offered. “I HAVE IMPORTANT AFFAIRS IN IRIAEBOR THAT I HAD TO DROP ALL AT ONCE TO DEAL WITH THIS RIDICULOUS OLD DIRECTIVE. I CERTAINLY HAD NO WISH TO WAIT DAYS AND DAYS IN RAVEN’S BLUFF FOR AN APPOINTMENT WITH YOU.”

“I wish to appeal to the Guild Council!” Jack shouted.

“I SHALL NOTE YOUR OBJECTIONS IN MY REPORT,” Tarandor replied. “I AM SURE THE GUILD WILL EXAMINE THE FACTS AND TAKE THE APPROPRIATE ACTION.” He lifted the bottle again and set it carefully into a waiting box or case.

“Wait!” Jack cried. “The drow will never allow you near their mythal now! There is no point in proceeding!”

“NEGOTIATIONS ARE ONGOING,” Tarandor admitted. “I WILL LIKELY HAVE TO PAY THE CHÛMAVHS A KING’S RANSOM TO BE DONE WITH THIS THANKLESS TASK—THE SOONER, THE BETTER. FAREWELL FOR NOW, JACK.” The immense shadow of his hand moved over the bottle again, and the lid of whatever box he’d placed Jack closed over the bottle. Instantly the bottle interior

was plunged into pitch blackness, but Jack felt the case holding his bottle picked up and carried off with an unpleasant swaying sensation. He tumbled to the sandy floor one more time, and scrambled desperately against the higher wall to keep from being buried in the stuff. Clearly, being reduced in size to an inch or two in height magnified all the ordinary motions of people retaining their natural dimensions.

"Stop! Wait!" he spluttered through a mouthful of sand. Of course, no one heard him, or would be terribly likely to listen even if they did. Throwing his arms wide against the cold glass walls of his prison, he held on as best he could as he was carried off to meet his fate.



The broad swaying of the bottle and case continued for some time; Jack imagined that he was being carried through the streets of Raven's Bluff, likely by the most junior of the wizards attending Tarandor. It was hard to judge the passage of time in the darkness, and of course there was no way to know how far he'd been carried, but eventually the bottle and its case came to a rest with a bone-jarring thump that knocked Jack down from his perch. The sense of motion and the constant sliding of the sand back and forth ceased abruptly; Jack decided that the bottle and its carrying case had been set down. He didn't think he'd been carried more than a half-hour or so; in all probability he was still somewhere in the city of Raven's Bluff. Was Tarandor staying in the High House of Magic, or had he taken lodging in one of the city's better inns? he wondered.

"This situation is impossible," Jack said into the blackness around him. "Either Tarandor will have his way, in which case I shall be entombed again, or Dresimil Chûmavh and her brothers will betray him, in which case I shall be in their power once more." Neither prospect was appealing; escape was clearly imperative.

Jack built a mental picture of the trunk in which his bottle rested and imagined its immediate surroundings. Before the thrice-cursed Spellplague he'd had a knack for minor teleportations. So far he hadn't managed to master any such spell in this new age, but this

seemed like the perfect occasion to renew his efforts. Murmuring the words he'd formerly used for his spell of blinking, he reached out to seize the intangible stands of magic surrounding him … only to feel nothing at all. He tried again, and again, to no avail. For a moment he feared that he'd lost whatever talent for spellcasting he had managed to recover, but then he realized that his current confinement might be magical as well as physical. "Well, naturally the bottle would be proof against magic," he muttered sourly. "How else could they hope to keep a sorcerer of my stature contained?"

Perhaps he might be able to unplug the stopper or otherwise make a physical exit from the bottle. For that he would need some light, so he called up a minor light spell to illuminate the area. But that, too, failed. Jack swore viciously in the dark, reminding himself that the bottle was made to wall him off from magic altogether.

"When magic fails, muscle and wit must serve," he resolved. He was, after all, carrying everything he'd been carrying when he gazed upon the symbol of entrapment; his favorite rapier was scabbarded at his side, even if it was no bigger than a pin at the moment, and he might have other useful items on his person. One by one he emptied his pockets and pouches, hoping against hope that he had anything that might serve to strike a light. Then he went through his satchel as well. He recognized the cool leather of the Sarkonagael under his fingers, and set aside the book to rummage through the bag. He found paper, ink, coinage, but nothing that might serve to strike a spark other than his dagger and his rapier. "I shall henceforward always carry a small piece of flint," he promised himself.

He considered his plight at length, and decided that the only step left for him to pursue was to worm his way up the neck of the bottle and pry it away with his dagger, light or no light. But before he could put his plan in operation, he noticed a faint silvery glow in the darkness. At first he thought that perhaps his eyes were playing tricks on him, but the longer he looked, the clearer he saw it: The silver runes on the cover of the Sarkonagael were glowing.

"Now that is interesting," Jack murmured. Seating himself on the sand floor, he picked up the book and held it in his lap as he

examined it more closely. With care he opened the book to see if the cryptic scribbling inside was also glowing … and was astonished to discover that the book's pages were full of perfectly legible silver lettering, bright enough to illuminate his hands and breeches. He had of course attempted to read the Secrets of the Shadewrights on previous occasions, but he had never been able to make heads or tails of the jumbled glyphs and diagrams that filled its pages. Now, however, the text was plain to see.

Despite his desperate circumstances, Jack laughed aloud. "Ingenious!" he declared. The enchantments of the tome obscured its message in anything but absolute lightlessness. Who would ever attempt to read a book in complete darkness? The wizard who had scribed this tome long ago had hidden its message with a puzzle both simple and diabolically clever.

And that was something noteworthy, too—Jack was absolutely walled off from access to magic by the bottle imprisoning him, but the Sarkonagael's magic seemed unimpeded. He'd heard stories of shadow magic, spells that weren't magic of the ordinary sort; it was reasonable that a book describing itself as the Secrets of the Shadewrights might make use of such powers. He could see by the Sarkonagael's dim light that the bottle's neck would be impossible for him to squeeze through, but perhaps there was a spell in the book that could help him to escape.

"It will take Tarandor some time to negotiate access to the mythal stone from the dark elves," the rogue mused. Hours, at the very least, and more likely a day or two. With nothing else to occupy his time, Jack made himself comfortable and began to read.

When beginning the study of an arcane tome, it was always wisest to begin at the very first page and take careful note of the frontispiece, foreword, table of contents, introduction, and so forth, and proceed very systematically from one chapter to the next in order. Jack, of course, immediately discarded any such plan. If he had a tenday to examine the book at his leisure he might have done exactly that, but his liberty or life might now be measured in hours; this was no time for caution. He quickly flipped through the book's front matter, found a table of contents, and puzzled over such

obscure topics as “Of Nethermancy and Umbral Magicks,” “Adumbrations and Dismissals,” and “The Seven Darks of Murghmö,” which struck Jack as vaguely ludicrous. But “Abjurations, Enchantments, and Conjurations” seemed more promising, so he flipped to the indicated chapter and found dozens of spells of varying complexity. Jack pored over the material and soon isolated a promising subject: a spell named “The Most Excellent Incantation of Shadow-Walking,” which at least implied going somewhere else.

Jack drew a breath, and began to examine the spell at greater length. This was in fact the sort of work a wizard excelled at; sorcerers were more spontaneous in their magic, and rarely studied spells in any sort of written form. Still, knowing that a spell existed was an important first step in perfecting it for his personal use, so he set himself to the task of unraveling each of the instructions, building up a mental construct that linked each word, gesture, or syllogism to the desired effect. Time passed, and he began to feel thirst, but he pressed on. After what seemed to be hours, he felt that he was as ready as he would ever be to attempt the spell. With a sigh of relief he straightened up and closed the Sarkonagael.

“Now, where could I expect to find a suitable shadow?” he asked himself. Well, his closet at Maldridge ought to be in darkness. He gathered up his things, and then fixing the image of the closet interior in his mind, he commenced to recite the spell. The darkness around him seemed to take on a brooding, watchful atmosphere; the strands of shadow magic did not show themselves to his mystic senses as he expected, but instead seemed to press in close around him, unbidden and hungry. Jack shuddered at the icy touch of the darkness but pressed on, speaking evenly through the rest of the spell. With the last words, the darkness seemed to rush in upon him, and his stomach rose almost as if he’d fallen into some great dark pit … but he felt himself lurching into existence again almost instantly. He was in a vast, dimly lit space the size of a cathedral, with a great blinding bar of yellow light on his right side. He raised his hand to shelter his eyes, wondering where he’d managed to

transport himself until, suddenly, the distant walls and ceiling began to rush in on him from all sides.

Jack yelped in surprise and scrambled back, only to find that wall closing in on him, too, even as the floor suddenly shot away. He flailed for balance, and felt his hands catching on tunics and coats and cloaks that filled the shrinking room, until at last he toppled over completely and crashed through the door. He found himself lying on the bedroom floor of his room in Maldridge amid a heap of his own fine new clothes.

"Of course," Jack mumbled to the ceiling. He'd been magically shrunk when he was trapped in the bottle; when he shadow-jumped into his closet, he resumed his normal height all at once. "I should have expected it, really." He slowly picked himself up, still feeling a little shaky on his feet.

The bedroom door flew open, and more light spilled into the room. Edelmon stood at the threshold in his nightclothes, a lamp in his end. "Who's there?" the old servant demanded. "Show yourself!"

"There is no need to fear, Edelmon. It is only I," Jack said wearily.

"Master Jack, I beg your pardon, sir. I thought you were out for the evening, and did not hear your return." Edelmon glanced at the open closet door and the piles of clothing around Jack, but said nothing more.

"What is the hour?" Jack asked.

"A little after three bells in the morning, I think, sir."

"Very well. As long as you are up, please be so kind as to find a bottle of something strong and a glass. I am very much in need of a drink to steady my nerves."

"Of course, sir. Right away." Edelmon lit the lamp by the door, then hurried off to fetch whatever cordial or brandy he had handy.

Jack dropped his satchel to the floor, and sat down in a chair by the closet to pull off his boots. Fine white sand poured out of each one as he pulled them off. "How long before Tarandor notices my absence?" he wondered. There was a chance that the wizard didn't intend to remove him from the carrying case until he stood before the mythal stone and was prepared to magic Jack back into his

encystment, which might be days yet. Or he might check on Jack in the morning to gloat a little longer. Now that he thought about it, the rogue almost wished he could be there to see the expression on the abjurer's face when he discovered that his carefully prepared entrapment had failed to hold Jack for even a single day … but that of course was hard to reconcile with the desire to avoid recapture.

"I must give some careful thought to exactly how I will inform Tarandor of my freedom; compensation is due," Jack reflected aloud. But that could wait a few hours; he was suddenly exhausted, no doubt from the exertion of decreasing and increasing his size a hundredfold in the course of a single day, and he could hear Edelmon returning. A strong nightcap, and then to bed, he decided. Wizards, shadowy tomes, suspicious fathers … tomorrow would be soon enough to untangle them all.

CHAPTER TEN

Jack didn't stir from his bed until ten bells in the morning. He trudged down the stairs yawning, thoroughly exhausted by the late night and his unusual adventures. He'd spent no small amount of time lying awake as he grappled with the challenge posed by Tarandor and his schemes, to little avail. It would be useful to determine how exactly Tarandor intended to return him to his confinement in the wild mythal, but Jack could not think of a way to do that safely if in fact the Guild itself sanctioned Tarandor's extreme measures. Wizards could be a bureaucratic and inflexible lot at times, and he could not be certain that the Guild would intervene on his side instead of Tarandor's. He might be able to find someone to serve as a go-between to broker some sort of truce with the guild, but anybody he dispatched in that capacity could easily be charmed or dominated and turned against Jack.

"Perhaps it is time I retired," he thought aloud as he sat down to his breakfast—now a very ordinary plate of toast with butter and jam and a cold mug of coffee.

The cook was apparently done with wasting time on him. "Or perhaps I should take up Lord Norwood's suggestion and travel for my health, preferably someplace where dogmatic wizards will not feel compelled to encyst me and throw away the metaphorical key."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Edelmon said as he shuffled into the room.

"I am beset by complications; answers are unclear."

"Ah, very good, sir. To what address shall I have your things sent today?"

"My things can stay right where they are for three more days, by my count, so I would appreciate it if you did not send them anywhere at all."

Edelmon acknowledged Jack's instructions with a small bow, and withdrew. Jack observed that no handbills waited neatly by his

place setting, nor was any correspondence arranged for his inspection. Apparently the cook was not the only one anticipating his imminent departure; Jack scowled after the valet for a moment, and drained down his lukewarm coffee with a grimace of distaste. What to do? he wondered. He had an engagement of sorts with Seila in the evening, but between now and then, he needed to find some suitable new address. “And that suggests resolving the question of the Sarkonagael’s reward in order to determine my budget,” he decided. He wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to part with the tome so soon after finding a use for its magic, but Tharzon and the Blue Wyverns would be waiting for their cut of the reward; it wouldn’t be wise to give them cause to doubt his trustworthiness.

Absorbed in his thoughts, Jack retrieved the Sarkonagael in its old wrappings from his satchel and brought it back to the table. “Myrkyssa Jelan caused a great deal of trouble with you once upon a time,” he told the book, “including the creation of an evil duplicate who subverted half the city against me. The last thing I need is another shadowy twin.”

There were some dark and strange spells in the tome, including a number that Jack did not really understand, but it was the spell of making shadow-doppelgangers that most concerned him. He didn’t particularly care if Myrkyssa Jelan or any other interested parties had access to any other part of the Sarkonagael, really. That suggested an obvious if somewhat crude solution. Jack took the tome into the cupboard (a roomy closet, really) and pulled the door shut behind him. He stood there in the dark for a moment until the book’s silver runes began to glow, then opened the book to the spell entitled “Sarkon’s Umbral Simulacrum.” He drew his dagger from his belt, and with great care removed the spell from the book, excising a total of four pages. If the Sarkonagael’s seeker had sinister intentions for that particular enchantment, the absence of the spell should check them quite thoroughly. He let himself out of the cupboard and took the book back to the dining room table for a little more work with better light, trimming the cut pages very close to the binding; it was hard to notice the missing pages without a careful inspection. Finally he took the removed pages, folded

them in half, and tucked them into an envelope from his stationery set before hiding it in the inner pocket of his jacket.

"There," he said to himself. "The tome is rendered completely harmless, and now I may proceed with confidence." It occurred to him that he might profit by taking the Secrets of the Shadewrights completely apart and selling it back a page or two at a time … but he reminded himself that the mysterious buyer had been willing to spend a large sum of gold to get his hands on the book, and might be tempted to post another reward to accelerate the process if it became tedious. He decided it would be better to leave the rest of the book intact.

Satisfied with his precautions, he wrapped up the Sarkonagael again, tucked it back into his satchel, and left his house. The day was unusually gloomy; a low, heavy overcast glowered above the rooftops, although there was no rain to speak of. He strolled south on MacIntyre to Morglar's Ride, then headed west into Altarside. Few people seemed to be out and about, and those who were had an unusually vigilant and hurried look; Jack began to wonder if he'd slept through some unusual alarm or if some dire news was abroad. He found himself looking down each alleyway he passed and peering into shadows, more than half-expecting to find another cloaked figure dogging his steps or vanishing from sight just as Jack noted a menacing presence. But this time he reached his destination without catching sight of any dark elf spies, real or imagined.

The counting house of Albrath stood not far from the City Hall. Jack climbed the stone steps to the door and entered; a long counter manned by several clerks stood along the wall, and doors of iron bars led to the offices behind the counter. Jack explained that he had retained the house's representation in an unusual service, which proved sufficient for one of the counter-clerks to unlock the door and escort him to a small private office inside.

He waited only a few moments before a portly, bearded merchant in a green tunic and matching cap appeared and took a seat behind the desk. "Good afternoon, sir," the fellow said in a warm voice. "I am Halden Albrath. How may I help you today?"

Jack hid a small smile. Halden likely didn't know it, but he very strongly resembled his great-great-grandfather Embro Albrath, with whom Jack had done business once upon a time. "I am the landsgrave Jaer Kell Wildhame, formerly of the Vilhon Reach, currently resident in the manor of Maldridge," Jack began. "A couple of days ago I sent a note instructing House Albrath to represent my interests in a delicate negotiation through Horthlaer House. Have you made any progress?"

"Ah, of course," Halden Albrath replied. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lord." He put his hand to his mouth and coughed delicately. "Before we continue, I should advise you that we customarily require a five percent fee for such representation. I took the liberty of assuming your consent, because your directions were specific. I saw to the matter myself."

Jack bestowed a gracious nod on the moneychanger, but winced inside. That amounted to several hundred gold crowns he'd never see again; he hoped his caution wasn't completely unnecessary. "I expected as much," he replied. "What did you learn?"

"The procedure is quite simple: Produce the book, and after Horthlaer House verifies its authenticity, you will be paid in gold crowns, platinum moons, gemstones, or a letter of credit, as you prefer. You can deliver it yourself, or leave the book with me and I will see to it."

"Does Horthlaer's client agree to pay the additional expenses I set forth in my previous instructions?"

The merchant offered a half-smile, as if he understood exactly what Jack meant by expenses. "To my surprise, yes. The buyer agreed to pay seven thousand crowns for the book."

"Excellent!" Jack grinned in satisfaction; that, of course, was nothing with which he needed to trouble his partners from the Sarbreen adventure. If he had it figured correctly, he now stood to collect twenty-five hundred crowns for his half of the original reward, plus two thousand crowns more for the additional reward he'd negotiated, less Albrath's three hundred and fifty—so overall better than half again what he'd originally planned on. His

prospects were far from displeasing, really. “I insist on remaining anonymous, of course.”

“Discretion is assured, my lord. If you have the book, we can deliver it this afternoon, and your reward will be available before five bells.”

“Very good,” Jack answered. He considered the matter one more time, then opened his satchel and set the heavy tome on the table. “Proceed with the arrangements. I will return this afternoon to collect my reward. Please have thirty-five hundred crowns set aside in platinum double moons; the rest of the sum I’ll take as credit against your house.”

“I shall see to it personally, sir,” Halden Albrath said. He stood and offered Jack his hand. “Until this afternoon, then.”

Jack shook the merchant’s hand, and allowed himself to be shown to the door. On the doorstep of Albrath’s, he paused to watch the passers-by, porters, and wagons on Morlgar’s Ride as he considered his fortunes. Although he had to find a new residence to replace the uncharitably withdrawn offer to make use of Maldridge, he’d end the day with more wealth than he had ever enjoyed in his life. Of course, he also had a powerful wizard who might try to magic him back into a tiny green bottle; dangerous enemies in Lady Dresimil, Fetterfist, and possibly Myrkyssa Jelan; and a powerful nobleman, Marden Norwood, who expected him to absent himself from Raven’s Bluff, perhaps permanently. “The measure of a man lies in the difficulties he surmounts,” Jack observed to the street, and set off to roam the Temple District.

He spent the rest of the morning inspecting potential residences in the better neighborhoods of town. Nothing seemed quite satisfactory for a man of his anticipated means, but perhaps some might be comfortable enough with a small staff. The gloomy weather hung over the city for the whole morning, until it finally overcame his high spirits and drove him back homeward. Footsore and tired, he retraced his steps to Maldridge.

None of the staff bothered to greet him when he let himself in, which gave Jack cause to wish them a variety of minor afflictions and discomforts as payment for their variable loyalties. He started

for his study with the idea of pouring himself a small glass of brandy to lighten his mood, but something in the sitting room just to the right from the foyer caught his eye: Two large traveling trunks or wardrobes stood in the middle of the room. Suspicion darkened the rogue's thoughts immediately; he went over to investigate, and found that his collection of fine new garments—really, the entirety of his material possessions, other than the things he happened to be wearing—had been rather carelessly packed away.

Jack's umbrage could no longer be contained. He stomped in a circle around the tall trunks, waving his arms in outrage. "Effrontery! Insubordination!" he shouted at the empty room. "Edelmon, present yourself at once!"

The old valet appeared at the sitting room's doorway. "You bellowed, Master Jack?"

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I have been notified that your tenancy here in Maldridge is soon ending at Lord Norwood's pleasure, sir. In the interest of rendering your exit as convenient as possible, I have taken the liberty of packing for you."

"This is premature! You are immediately dismissed from my service."

"Very good, sir," the old servant replied. "I shall bring the matter to Lord Norwood's attention the day after tomorrow, and abide by whatever penalty or adjustment he assigns." Edelmon gave a shallow bow, and shuffled back into the foyer … and at that moment the kitchen door at the rear of the house flew open with a crash.

"What the devil was that?" Jack demanded.

"I shall find out, sir," Edelmon replied. He headed toward the back of the house. Jack paused in his inspection of the wardrobes, waiting for the old servant to report. Instead, the soft snap of bowstrings echoed in the hall; Edelmon let out one strangled shriek, and after that came the unmistakable sound of a human body crumpling to the floor.

That can't be good, Jack realized. He looked around, searching for an escape from the sitting room. He could make a break for the front door, but that would take him into the front hall—where Edelmon had just been shot, unless he missed his guess. Or he could dart into the dining room and then to the kitchen and the door through which some unknown assailants had just entered his house. As he stood frozen and indecisive for one critical moment, the question was decided for him: Half a dozen black-clad figures in dark clothing swarmed into the sitting room, and turned their hand crossbows on Jack. Between low-hanging hoods and drawn-high scarves wrapped around their lower faces, the crimson eyes and smooth ebony features of drow warriors fixed on Jack with predatory malice.

The leader, none other than Jack's former tormentor, Varys, met Jack's eyes with a menacing smile. "Lord Wildhame," he said with a mocking bow. "The marquise Dresimil sends her greetings and would like to extend her invitation to return to Chûmavhraele. The circumstances of your departure demand nothing less."

Jack stared at the dark elves in horror for several heartbeats. Varys grinned wickedly at him. Jack couldn't begin to imagine what sort of tortures Dresimil might have in mind for him if the drow recaptured him; he might have been better off in Tarandor's green bottle. Somehow he found his voice and said, "I am afraid I must decline at this time. As you can see, I am packed for a long journey. I promise I will call on your lovely marquise as soon as I return."

"Ah, but our lady insists," the drow sergeant replied. He raised his hand-crossbow, as did the rest of his warriors. As they fired, Jack yanked open the door of the large wardrobe he was standing next to and ducked behind the improvised shield. The small quarrels thudded into the trunk, their points puncturing the door, but none struck Jack. The rogue searched himself for tiny poisoned quarrels, found none, and darted for the dining room doorway.

Varys snarled in frustration. "After him!" he hissed. "Do not let him escape!"

Jack dashed from the sitting room into the dining room. The drow pursued him at once, no more than four or five steps behind him.

He dared not pause long enough to try a spell, and simply ran for the door from the dining room to the kitchen. Then sudden, absolute darkness filled the room, as if he'd run into a coal cellar on a moonless night. Jack stumbled over a chair and floundered blindly along the large table in the middle of the room as he tried to keep moving. "Shar's black heart!" he snarled, groping blindly through the blackness. The drow might as well have blinded him with their accursed darkness spells!

He found a doorway with one outstretched hand and hurried through, only to realize that he'd found the wrong door—he was back in the front hall. The pull-chain for the grand chandelier was under his hand, which meant that he was facing back toward the front door. Or was it on the other side of the hall? He couldn't remember. The stealthy rush of feet whispered in the supernatural gloom behind him … but now he thought he could hear the dark elves *ahead* of him, too. They were surrounding him while he couldn't see!

"The front hall!" Varys called softly to the others. None of the other drow replied, which was even more intimidating than a chorus of answers would have been.

This is insufferable, Jack raged silently. What harm had he ever done to the drow? Why were they so damned unreasonable about things? He couldn't go back into the dining room, and he could hear soft movement approaching from the foyer. There was a dark elf there in the middle of the hall, perhaps two or three, closing in on him while he cowered by the wall. He could try to grope his way into the kitchen, but they'd be on him in moments unless he did something they didn't expect—and that suggested a counterattack.

With one quick motion, Jack seized the chandelier's chain, undid it from the wall cleat, and let it go. The huge fixture was a magnificent piece of ironwork, easily eight feet in diameter and hundreds of pounds in weight. The chain rattled and clacked loudly for an instant, then the whole thing plummeted to the hall's zalantar-wood floor with a resounding crash and the shrill tinkle of breaking glass. A drow cried out in pain, and others shouted in alarm; Jack felt a sudden wash of heat and the crackle of flame in

front of him as the chandelier's oil lamps broke and ignited, even though the fire was completely hidden by the darkness spell.

"Hah! Take that, you fiends," Jack called. He turned and stumbled toward the kitchen, hoping that the way to the back door was now open. He took two steps—and the darkness was abruptly gone. He stood in the kitchen doorway, with a hooded drow warrior blocking his way. Edelmon was lying unconscious almost right at his feet, several drow crossbow-bolts lodged in him, none in any particularly lethal spot. Jack barely noticed his valet, however—behind them both a spreading pool of lamp-oil burned fiercely under the wreckage of the chandelier. A drow soldier was lying in the burning oil, crushed under the fallen fixture. Varys and another warrior were right behind him, and the remaining drow warriors blocked the doorway to the dining room and the grand stairs leading to the upper floors.

Varys skirted the flames and advanced with his hand crossbow trained on Jack's midsection. "Clever," the sergeant said. "I had hoped you might provide a little sport for us. Now place your hands on your head and hold still while my warriors bind you. I do not care to carry you all way back down to Chûmavhraele, but I will put you to sleep if I must."

"What do you want with me?" Jack demanded. "Are you in such sore need of dung-shovelers?"

"I suspect you will soon beg for the chance to shovel dung, my lord," Varys replied. "The marquise has something special planned for you. Your hands?"

Jack glanced left and right, searching for some opening and finding none. The fire in the front hall was spreading to the room's hangings and the fine paneling; acrid smoke filled the air. He could try a spell, but the dark elves would stick at least one envenomed quarrel in him before he finished, and then he'd be just as useless as poor Edelmon snoring on the floor. He briefly considered forcing the drow warriors to shoot him just for the spite of making them carry him back down to the Underdark, but then he realized that if he had any hope at all for escape, he would need to be conscious.

With a shallow cough and watering eyes, he backed away into the kitchen and reluctantly raised his hands.

The dark elves wasted no more time. In a flash two surged up to seize his wrists and bind them behind his back, while a third fitted him with a gag and yanked a thick black hood over his head. Jack twisted and fought in protest, to no avail. Hands closed on his arms and shoulders, and he was hustled out of Maldridge with the smell of smoke thick in his nostrils.



Hooded and bound as he was, Jack could only guess at where the drow were taking him. They shoved him out the kitchen door and through the garden outside, keeping such a tight grip that when he inevitably stumbled and tripped over unseen obstacles they dragged him along with hardly a step missed. Jack thought he heard the rasping sound of the garden gate's rusty bolt sliding through its brackets, and then Dresimil's hunters hurried out into the unpaved alleyway behind Maldridge. They turned left, or so he thought, and led him down the alley some distance before another door creaked open. Then the rogue was manhandled through a doorway and down a short flight of wooden steps into a dark, damp place—a cellar, most likely. Something clattered and thumped; the dark elves whispered to each other. Although Jack strained to listen in, he couldn't make out much of their strange Elvish, at least not with the heavy hood over his head.

It seems the drow use the cellars and alleys to stay out of sight, he decided, or at least they took pains to avoid being seen on the open streets by daylight. How many abandoned cellars or secret boltholes did they have scattered throughout the city? A moment later, stone scraped on stone, and a whiff of cold, rank air came to his nose. The dark elves seized him again and maneuvered him through a doorway and down several more steps. He could hear the gurgle and splash of slow-moving water, and the sounds around him took on a hollow, echoing tone.

"The sewers," he murmured to himself—although the gag over his mouth rendered the remark into a muffled pair of grunts. Jack

mentally added the excellent dwarf-built network of drainage tunnels beneath Raven's Bluff to the dark elves' routes for moving around the city unnoticed. He would have thought the drow too fastidious to spend much time in the dank, unhealthy tunnels, but then again, one could hardly come up from the Underdark without passing through Sarbreen, and one could hardly go from Sarbreen to the surface without passing through the sewers. The dark elves turned him toward the right, keeping to the somewhat drier ledge or walkway that ran close to the right-hand wall. Once or twice Jack stepped into cold, foul-smelling water. He found himself wishing they'd hurry up and leave the sewer behind, until he remembered what was likely waiting for him when they reached Tower Chûmavhraele.

He winced inside his hood. If he was lucky, Dresimil Chûmavh would have him put to death in some quick and spectacular manner. Otherwise she'd have her minions torture him for days or tendays before allowing him to die. "I refuse to give her the satisfaction of begging for mercy," he resolved under his gag … but somehow he suspected that the dark elves had ways to break tougher men than he. Some morbid part of his imagination started worrying about which specific tortures the drow would employ, and no matter how much Jack fought against it, a whole array of fiendish devices and tactics filled his mind.

Suddenly he was jerked to a halt and roughly pushed to his knees. He started to protest, but a drow close behind him cuffed him by his ear. "Still and silent!" the dark elf hissed.

Jack bit back another cry of pain and did his best to keep still. He listened intently, hearing nothing but the dripping echoes of the sewer around him. The drow barely made a sound; he could imagine they were talking to each other with the clever sign language he'd seen once or twice in Chûmavhraele. Why would they stop here? he wondered. Had they met someone else in the sewers?

He leaned forward, trying to hear something, anything at all—and suddenly complete chaos exploded all around him. Shouts of anger rang through the tunnels, steel whispered against leather as blades were drawn, bowstrings snapped, and frantic splashing and

plunging broke the steady murmur of the drain water. “What? What’s going on?” Jack demanded of his captors, and of course succeeded only in producing more unintelligible grunts. Then he was shoved to the ground by a hand in the middle of his back, and the shrill ring of steel against steel filled the tunnel. Someone screamed nearby, and someone else roared in fury.

“Fools!” shrieked Varys. “You dare to interfere with us? Slay them all!”

Jack started working to free himself. Lying on the ground, he got one foot against the sewer wall and used the leverage to scoot his bound hands underneath his buttocks. A few heartbeats of desperate wriggling brought his hands up under his knees, then around his feet one at a time. The fight raged on all around him, with cries of pain and panic—some drow, some human. There was a strange crackling, tearing sound, and Jack sensed strong magic close by him. A body fell almost on top of him—a dark elf, judging by the slender build and light weight. Jack ignored the body and dragged the hood from his head, rolling to his feet to make a break for freedom.

Several of the dark elves lay dead or unconscious around him, alongside a couple of human ruffians he didn’t recognize. More of the street toughs surrounded the rest of the drow, battling with knife and sling against rapier and hand crossbow. One of the dark elves went down under the impact of a sling bullet, and the fighting grew even more desperate. Jack decided that he wouldn’t get through the press in that direction, and turned to flee in the other direction—but there the drow sergeant Varys dueled none other than Myrkyssa Jelan. The elf wizard Kilarnan stood just a few steps behind the warlord, sword and wand in hand.

“Jelan?” Jack said in surprise, except that it came out as “Jmm-wnnhh?” because he was still gagged. Angrily he reached up and yanked the gag from his mouth. What he needed was a bit of magic, perhaps an invisibility spell to steal away from this unexpected brawl before he was missed … but he was too late. Jelan parried two lightning-quick thrusts of Varys’s rapier, then stepped inside the dark elf’s reach and sliced his head three-quarters off his neck with a

wicked draw cut. Varys reeled around and collapsed in a heap as Jelan's thugs overpowered the remaining drow.

Jelan eyed the dead drow in front of her with a small smile before she raised her gaze to Jack. "Well, then. I thought I told you to watch out for the drow, Jack."

The rogue stared a moment in surprise, relief, and no small amount of apprehension. Out of the frying pan and into the fire? he wondered. "Elana," he finally said. "What are you doing here?"

"I and my Moon Daggers have been engaged in something of a dispute with the drow for several tendays now," Jelan replied. "They seem to think they have the run of the city. I disagree. I certainly saw no reason to let them take you back down to Chûmavhraele."

"But …" Jack's natural loquaciousness was nowhere to be found. It seemed this day was full of surprises; he rallied and tried again. "How did you know they had me?"

"I have my sources at Horthlaer's. I received word this morning that a deal had been struck for the Sarkonagael, so I moved my agents into place to seize the book. One of my spies was watching Maldridge; when the drow stormed the house, he sent for help. I had an idea the dark elves would head for the nearest entrance to Sarbreen with you, so I moved to intercept them. Excuse me for a moment." Jelan moved past Jack to check on the rest of her men. She knelt briefly by one of the fallen ruffians, and shook her head—it looked like the fellow had taken a rapier-thrust through the heart. She moved to the next, and pulled a small crossbow-quarrel from his shoulder. "Darrek should be fine," she said to her ruffians. "He'll wake up in an hour or two with a splitting headache. Drow sleep-venom is strong stuff."

"You were plotting to steal the Sarkonagael from me?" Jack demanded.

Jelan shrugged. "I would have done it last night, but you and the book were nowhere to be found. Where were you hiding?"

Jack frowned, wondering what had deterred Jelan for a moment before the answer came to him: She must have been looking for him during the time that he'd been confined in Tarandor's accursed

green bottle! Truly, events were moving at a dizzying pace; his rivals and enemies were falling all over each other in their eagerness to foil him. “I was inconvenienced by a completely unreasonable wizard,” he replied. More than that she probably would not believe.

“You would be wise to choose your enemies with more care,” Jelan said. She indicated the dark elves lying dead in the sewer tunnel with a nod of her head. “Now, it seems to me that I have rendered you something of a service by snatching you out of Dresimil Chûmavh’s talons. The price of my assistance is, of course, the Sarkonagael. Where might I find the book?”

Jack steeled himself; somehow he doubted that Jelan would like what he was about to say. “I no longer have it, Elana,” he answered. “I turned it in for the reward. Which I have not yet collected, by the way, so there is no need to rob me at the moment.”

Myrkyssa Jelan frowned and stared levelly into his eyes for a long moment. “You turned it in?” she said. “Do not lie to me, Jack. I have been watching Horthlaer’s, and I know they do not have the book.”

“That was likely true an hour or two ago, but if Horthlaer’s does not have it by now, they will by the end of the day. I arranged another counting house to represent me, and left the Sarkonagael in their hands.”

The swordswoman muttered something to herself in a language that sounded like Shou, and turned away in frustration. Kilarnan looked at his employer. “Do we try to retrieve it from Horthlaer’s?” the elf asked. “It could be done.”

Jelan shook her head. “We would need days to arrange it; Horthlaer’s is the next best thing to a fortress. And we would set the whole of the city against us. The prize isn’t worth the cost of the throw.” She looked back at Jack, who was suddenly very conscious of the fact that he still had his hands bound in front of him and was still surrounded by her henchmen. “Did I not warn you against allowing the Sarkonagael to fall into the wrong hands?”

“Heeding warnings has never been easy for me, Elana.”

“Yes, I think I’ve learned that about you.” She glared at him. “Do you know who has the Sarkonagael now?”

Jack shook his head. “I did not determine the identity of the buyer.”

“Well, I did,” Jelan replied. “You have delivered the Secrets of the Shadewrights into the hands of Lord Norwood.”

“Norwood? Lord Marden Norwood?” Jack blinked in surprise. “What in the world would he want with it?”

“That is the question, now, isn’t it? The spell of shadow-simulacra is a potent weapon. It is a perfect tool for espionage, manipulation, or simple assassination. Do you know what might be done with that sort of magic in the wrong hands?”

Jack refrained from pointing out that Myrkyssa Jelan possessed that knowledge because she had in fact been the wrong hands just a few short years ago, by his measure. He also refrained from pointing out that the spell in question was actually in his vest pocket. Why did Seila’s father want the Sarkonagael? Was he engaged in some secret skullduggery of his own, or was he in cahoots with the drow in some unexpected manner? Jack’s mood soured even more at that thought. As heartily as he disliked Marden Norwood at the moment, for Seila’s sake he hoped that the man was not a villain. “Why do you distrust Norwood?” he asked.

“Have you seen how the nobles rule over Raven’s Bluff?” Jelan countered. “They control the city’s trade, its laws, the magistrates, the watch, the city officials, the Wizards’ Guild, everything. What do you think might happen when you give a man accustomed to using power as he pleases the sort of power the Sarkonagael holds?”

“He might want it simply for safekeeping,” said Jack, even though he was not at all sure that was the case.

“Possibly, but that is not a gamble I care to take.” The swordswoman motioned to her surviving mercenaries.

“Let us be on our way—there may be more drow about. Jack, you will find a stair leading back to the streets about thirty yards behind you.”

“That is it?” Jack asked. “You are letting me go?”

“You have nothing I want,” Jelan replied. She drew a dagger from her belt; Jack flinched despite his best efforts to hold still, but she merely sliced the bonds on his wrists and returned the knife to its sheath. “However … you have access to Norwood Manor that I do not. If Norwood tires of your games or you decide that he shouldn’t have that book you gave him after all, I’ll reward you for bringing it to me. Ask for Elana at Nimber’s Skewer Shop—that is how I prefer to be known in the current day. And you’d best heed my advice about avoiding the drow in the future, Jack. It might not be in my interest to rescue you again.” Then she turned on her heel and strode off, her small gang falling in behind her.

Jack stood in the dank sewer, surrounded by dead dark elves, and stared after Myrkyssa Jelan in confusion. He would never understand her peculiarities, not in a hundred years … which was ironic, considering that that was about how long he’d known her by one measure. He stooped to arm himself with a rapier and crossbow from the nearest dark elf, then hurried off to find his way back to the city streets.

Maldridge, unfortunately, burned to the ground.



“This will not endear me to Marden Norwood,” Jack muttered, watching the firefighting companies breaking up the smoldering debris and dousing hot spots with water pumped from their great wagons. “The destruction of Maldridge will try his patience sorely, or I am a goblin.” Somehow he doubted that Norwood would believe any story of drow kidnapers and accidental fires, not when the old lord was already inclined to look at him as a scoundrel and a fraud. Jack’s mind turned again to Norwood’s parting remark about the influence he wielded in the city and the sort of troubles he could arrange if his patience were tried.

He managed to retrieve about half of his new wardrobe, thanks in no small part to the fact that Edelmon had conveniently arranged his belongings close by the front door. Looters had carried off the large, fine trunks in which his new clothes had been housed. That, of course, was not unusual—opportunistic sorts had been racing fire

companies to the scene of any fire since long before Jack's time. He was, however, simultaneously insulted and relieved to find that the looters had discarded Jack's bold and colorful garments in the street while stealing the trunks themselves. At least the looters had shown the uncommon decency to drag the unconscious Edelmon out of the burning house, or so Jack heard from the gawkers still standing about. Although he had no particular obligation to look after his discharged valet, he wouldn't have wanted the old wretch to have ended up dead on his account.

It seemed unwise to linger near the destroyed mansion for long, so Jack carried a heaping armful of his clothing away from the scene. At a chandlery two streets over he found a large canvas duffel that could accommodate his sadly reduced wardrobe, stuffed his smoky-smelling clothes within, and set off again with all his possessions in the world carried over his shoulder.

A temporary setback, he told himself, and not a sign of any lasting change of fortunes—but just in case, Jack went straightaway to the counting house of Horthlaer to withdraw every last copper of the credit Norwood had provided for him. The old lord might remember to revoke the line of credit, or he might not, but Jack wasn't about to take any chances. He decided to leave the Sarkonagael reward in the care of House Albrath for now; there was a limit to the amount of gold Jack wanted to carry around in a duffel without a place to lay his head at night. And then, since the afternoon was growing late and he had no idea where else to go, he wandered toward the Smoke Wyrm. He was sorely in need of a few tankards of good ale.

The dwarven taproom was bustling with business; the workday was done for many of the city's common folk. Jack bought a pint of Old Smoky, ignoring the irony of the transaction, and found himself a seat at a small table by the wall. His duffel he slid under his chair. "Things are not so bad as they seem," he reminded himself after a long pull from the tankard. He was still a man of means, after all. What did it matter that all the possessions he called his own could now fit in a canvas bag under his seat? He had a fortune of thousands of gold crowns to reestablish himself in more comfort whenever he liked.

“Maldridge was too big for me anyway,” he decided, and soothed his throat with another pull from his mug. “I will find myself a smaller, more comfortable place to call my own, and fit it with a front door that would defeat a rampaging minotaur.” The notion had much to recommend it … but the small satisfaction he felt from the resolution dulled all too quickly. When he considered all the schemes and ambitions he’d developed upon liberating himself from the dark elves’ captivity, he could truthfully say he was satisfied with the progress of not a single one of them. He’d had some success in winning the affections of the delightful (and delightfully wealthy) Seila Norwood, only to incur the mortal disapproval of her father. He’d discovered who had imprisoned him in the wild mythal a hundred years past, but now an impatient wizard of some skill seemed determined to return him to his prison as soon as possible. The Sarkonagael he had recovered in a daring and well-executed expedition to Sarbreen, only to discover that he’d undertaken the effort on behalf of the man who distrusted him more than anybody in Raven’s Bluff. And of course his ambitions of establishing himself in the elevated company of the city’s noble classes had foundered on the twin rocks of Norwood’s disfavor and a drowish vendetta.

“Appearances are important,” he reflected glumly. Jaer Kell Wildhame, heroic adversary of the dark elves and well-heeled intimate of Lord Marden Norwood, was a fellow who was clearly going places. Jack Ravenwild, fraud and arsonist, was much less compelling. “Somehow I must find a way to present myself in a better light.”

The first order of business was to arrange a roof over his head. Jack spied Tharzon behind the bar, consulting with Kurzen on some matter or another, and an idea came to mind. He hopped up from his seat and crossed the taproom to address the old dwarf. “Friend Tharzon, I am in need of some advice,” he said.

Tharzon looked Jack up and down. “Rise early, and go to bed soon after the sun,” he replied. “You will be astonished at how much more you can do in a day’s work. Oh, and pay your debts promptly in full. Your comrades in the Sarbreen venture are beginning to wonder about your reliability.”

“The former is difficult and impractical. I have little interest in doing more in a day’s work, as you should well know. As to the latter …” Jack suppressed a wince. He hadn’t meant to part with twenty-five hundred coins of gold this very day; scrupulous attention to debt was against his nature. But in this case perhaps it was for the best. Thanks to his stop at Horthlaer’s he had sufficient funds on his person, and he was sorely in need of allies on whom he could rely. “As to the latter, you will be happy to learn that I have concluded the business of the Sarkonagael, and can pay you, your son, and the stouthearted Blue Wyverns this very moment.”

Tharzon’s bushy white eyebrows climbed in surprise. “That I was not expecting,” he said. He jerked his head toward the keg room behind the bar. “Well, step around the bar, then, and let’s count it where we’ll not have every eye in the place on us.”

Jack feigned a broad, sincere smile, and followed the old dwarf into the next room. Under Tharzon’s watchful eye he counted out five stacks of platinum double-moons, each coin worth twenty crowns, on a battered old work-counter beneath the heavy casks of ale. “There you are, my friend—a good day’s work,” he said. “You can see to it that Kurzen, Narm, Arlith, and Halamar get their cuts?”

Tharzon nodded in satisfaction. “I’ll take care of it,” he said. He swept the coins into a good-sized coinpurse, and tucked the purse inside his tunic.

“Now, about that advice,” Jack said. “Do you know of any quiet, safe, and comfortable place where I might hang my cape for a few days until I put my affairs in better order? Anonymity would be advantageous.”

“This has something to do with the fire at Maldridge today, doesn’t it?” the old dwarf grunted. “Well, you can’t stay here—I prefer to stay clear of your troubles.”

“Surely you must have some recommendation?”

Tharzon frowned beneath his beard, thinking. “There is a vacant tinsmith’s shop with a small apartment upstairs, over on Broken Bit Lane,” he finally said. “I happen to hold the deed. From time to time I arrange for friends who don’t want to be found to stay there.

You can have it for a few days, but mind you, Jack, I don't want the place burned down."

"It sounds ideal," Jack replied.

"You may revise your opinion soon enough. It's cramped, cluttered, and furnished only with a cot," the dwarf answered. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a simple iron key. "Number sixteen."

"I thank you." Jack decided that Tharzon was simply exercising modesty in describing the tinsmith's room in such cautious terms, and accepted the key. Nightfall was not far off; he was not looking forward to lugging the heavy duffel several blocks, but it would probably be best to take care of the job before dark. One last mug of Old Smoky, then, or perhaps two … He followed Tharzon back out to the taproom, laid down a silver talent on the bar for a refill, and returned to the table where all his worldly possessions sat.

"Jack Ravenwild."

Jack looked up from his mug and discovered the fire-mage Halamar at his table. The sorcerer gave him a small nod, his shaggy red braids falling around his shoulders. "This is something of a coincidence," the sorcerer continued. "I was recently engaged in a conversation about you. May I join you, sir?"

"By all means," Jack replied, gesturing at the seat across the table. He straightened up and kicked the canvas bag out of the way.

Halamar took the proffered chair, and signaled to Kurzen at the bar. The dwarf nodded and drew a pint for the mage, who cleverly used a minor telekinesis to summon it to his hand. "Ahh, that's good," he said. "Now, as I was saying—strange, do you smell smoke?"

"I smell little else," Jack muttered darkly. "Please, continue."

"Anyway, I was at the High House of Magic earlier this afternoon, and I encountered our esteemed visitor Tarandor Delhame berating his apprentices about some oversight or inattentiveness on their part. The door to his chamber stood open; there was a finely carved wooden case standing on his desk, with a strange greenish-black bottle next to it. I admit his distress provoked my curiosity, so when

he was finished with his disciplinary measures, I asked him what had gone wrong.

"Tarandor said to me, 'That ignorant, strutting buffoon of a sorcerer'—his words, not mine—'has somehow escaped a very expensive spell of entrapment, and now I will have to start all over again.' I asked him what sorcerer he was referring to. 'Jack Ravenwild,' he replied. 'It was a conjuration of the eighth order, proof against the escape of any prisoner short of an archmage or demon prince. How could he have slipped out?'

"Well, I was surprised that Tarandor knew you by name. 'Why in the world would you want to entrap Jack Ravenwild?' I asked. 'I am under an obligation to do so,' Tarandor replied. 'Meritheus left instructions for my master, who passed them on to me. Apparently he foresaw some calamity involving Ravenwild.' I pointed out that it was impossible to know what threat old Meritheus foresaw or whether it still pertained after so many years. Tarandor only shrugged. 'Who cares?' he replied. 'All I want to do is discharge my obligation as quickly as possible and return to Iriaebor.'

"I remonstrated with Tarandor, but it was clear that he had little interest in my views." Halamar paused to imbibe a long swallow of his ale, and continued. "Anyway, I went on my way rather puzzled by the whole episode. I hope you can provide some new insight. Oh, and by the way, how did you escape an entrapment of the eighth order? That is no small feat."

"I am a man of hidden talents," Jack replied. "As it turned out, I had the Sarkonagael on my person when Tarandor conjured me into that bottle. I found a spell inside that helped me to escape. A shame that Tarandor has already noticed my absence; I was hoping he would remain ignorant of my freedom for some time yet."

"That is unfortunate. Tarandor is a very capable abjurer. I would not want to have him determined to imprison me."

"What will you tell Tarandor when you see him again?" Jack asked.

The fire-sorcerer scratched at his small patch of beard and shrugged. "Not a thing. In the first place, I find him arrogant and overbearing. More important, I am still awaiting my five-hundred-

crown share from the disposal of the Sarkonagael, which I would be unlikely to receive if you were to be thrust back into permanent stasis. Speaking of which, have you claimed the reward yet? I would feel better if we resolved that without much more delay."

"I settled it today. Your share is in Tharzon's keeping."

"Indeed?" Halamar glanced over at the bar and caught the old dwarf's eye. Tharzon gave him a small nod. "Excellent! I had been led to understand that you sometimes experienced difficulties in observing such details." He raised his tankard to Jack, and took a deep drink.

Jack took the opportunity to do likewise with his own cup, while thinking hard about the challenge posed by Tarandor's unreasonable suspicions. He could hardly continue with his ordinary business if a competent and ambitious wizard was determined to trap him again. Somehow he would have to find a way to dissuade Tarandor from any further attacks on his liberty. "It seems that I will have to discourage Tarandor," he mused. "I assume that the Guild might frown on murder or abduction?"

Halamar simply looked at Jack. "Can you think of any better way to confirm Tarandor's misgivings about you?"

"A theoretical question only," said Jack. He frowned in thought, considering the question of how to avoid recapture at Tarandor's hands. Outside, the temple bells began to strike the hour; when they reached six bells, he suddenly leaped to his feet and slapped a hand to his forehead. "Selûne's silver slippers!" he cried. "I am supposed to meet Seila at the opera in an hour!"

Halamar raised an eyebrow. "Do not let me detain you, then."

"We will continue this conversation later," Jack promised. "My thanks for your news, Halamar." With that, he seized the duffel with the remnants of his wardrobe, threw it up on his shoulder, and hurried to the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A LITTLE BEFORE EIGHT BELLS IN THE EVENING, JACK strolled up to the Rundelstone Opera House. He'd hurried from the Smoke Wyrm to the dismal little apartment above the vacant tinsmith's shop, washed quickly, and changed his clothes before racing back across town to Rundelstone. He wore a fine pair of black silk breeches, a double-breasted tunic of black with silver buttons, a short cape, and a rakish felt hat. They were the least-rumpled and least-smoky of his clothes. Of course, no one noticed his fine ensemble at the door, because he was invisible.

With some difficulty he worked his way through the crowd; in close quarters it was difficult to avoid being jostled, especially when other people had no reason not to walk right through where he happened to be standing. Jack feared for a moment that arousing suspicions with an invisible collision was inevitable, but before he caused a scene he hit upon the strategy of drawing up as close as he could behind a tall, important-looking lord. Other opera-goers naturally deferred to the fellow and helpfully cleared out of his path. Once the nobleman paused to sniff at the unexplained aroma of smoke in his vicinity, but he pressed on with a shrug, and Jack followed him inside.

Jack quickly fled the crowded lobby and climbed the stairs to the box level. Finding himself momentarily alone in the stairwell, he resumed visibility and began to look for the Norwood box. He discovered that the boxes were labeled with brass placards engraved with the name of the seats' owner for the season, which made finding Seila a simple matter indeed. With one last look around for any observers, Jack cautiously opened the door at the back of the box and slipped into the back of the small balcony enclosure.

Seila waited inside, wearing a splendid green dress with a pale golden fur draped over her lovely shoulders. She looked up as Jack entered and frowned at him. "There you are," she said in a low

voice. “I have been worried sick about you all day, Jack! I feared you were lying dead in the ashes of Maldridge.”

“There was no need to fear,” Jack told her. “I am unharmed; I was not even home when the fire started.”

She gave Jack a suspicious look. “Then why do you smell like smoke?”

“I am afraid that my clothes—other than the ones I was wearing at the time, of course—*were* home. I managed to rescue half my wardrobe before the flames consumed the manor; this outfit seemed somewhat less permeated than anything else remaining in my possession.”

He took the seat beside hers and leaned over to kiss her, but she pulled back after lightly brushing his lips with hers. “Jack, Maldridge was better than two hundred years old,” she said. “The house was a treasure of my family. I have to tell you, my father is beyond furious. I have never seen him so angry. He thinks you burned down Maldridge on purpose!”

“That is ridiculous. Your father and I have our differences at the moment, but destroying Maldridge certainly would do nothing to resolve them. What could I possibly gain from such an action?”

Seila wavered, her mouth pursed. After a long moment she asked, “How did it happen?”

“Your father should take up that question with Marquise Dresimil. Her warriors were the fellows responsible for Maldridge’s destruction.”

“The *drow* set fire to Maldridge?” Seila exclaimed, perhaps more loudly than she’d meant to. Jack noticed heads in nearby boxes glancing in their direction. Fortunately, the orchestra was beginning to tune up, and the theater was filled with the audience’s chatter before the show; Seila’s voice did not carry far. “They were in Raven’s Bluff? Why would they do such a thing?”

“They were very definitely in Raven’s Bluff,” Jack replied. “As far as why they attacked Maldridge, well, I had occasion to speak with Myrkyssa Jelan a few days ago. She informed me that a party of dark elves had tried to spirit her back to the Underdark. I can only speculate that the band that attacked Maldridge was looking for me,

and perhaps fired the house in spite when they found that they'd missed me. It seems that Dresimil wants her escaped captives back."

"You've seen Myrkyssa Jelan?" Seila was self-conscious enough to lower her voice to a whisper this time. "By all that's holy, Jack, what have you gotten yourself into? You couldn't possibly expect me to believe that she is involved in this, too!"

Jack stifled a small cough. "As long as we are dealing in unfortunate developments, I should probably add a word of warning about Master Tarandor Delhame—you remember, the wizard we met at the party? He represents interests that imprisoned me in my own time, and is dissatisfied with my liberty. He may try to find me through you." Seila started to protest, but Jack motioned for patience and leaned forward to spy out the crowd as discretely as he could. "A moment, my dear—give me a chance to look for our friend the slaver before they lower the house lights."

"Fetterfist would seem to be the least of your concerns right now," Seila said, a little crossly. But she drew closer to Jack and studied the crowd for a moment.

"Look for a tall, clean-shaven man, with straw-colored hair," Jack replied. "Not too young, not too old—I would guess his age at thirty to forty."

"Hmm. That fellow in red, in the third row?"

Jack followed Seila's gaze, and shook his head. "Too fat. Fetterfist is a lean, bony fellow." Together they searched the crowd until the house's lamplighters came out to lower the lights, to no avail—the slaver was nowhere in sight. However, Seila did point out several men of about the right frame and appearance that Jack was able to definitively eliminate. The young noblewoman had actually brought a list of the male guests from the Norwood party who answered to Fetterfist's general description, and she lined out names with a small charcoal pencil.

"Well, that was not as useful as I'd hoped," Jack remarked as the opening overture began. "What now?"

"Wait and watch," Seila advised. "It's not unusual for people to show up late. We might find him at intermission."

They watched the opening scene of *The Fall of Myth Drannor*. Jack found it confusing and melodramatic, with far too many Elvish names and characters to keep track of. He soon fell to studying the crowd in the low lighting, turning his attention to the stage only when some particularly spectacular movement of the music caught his ear. Seila, on the other hand, seemed quite affected by the opera and watched with rapt interest as the hero and his lady sang of the folly of love in a time of war and destruction.

At a quiet moment between scenes, Jack renewed the conversation. “I see a number of new arrivals, but no sign of our slaver yet,” he said. “How about you?”

Seila shook her head. “I recognize most of the people who have taken their seats during the first act. None of them could pass for Fetterfist unless he is a master of disguise.”

“Hmmm, perhaps he has no particular liking for opera. When is the next event of social significance?”

“The Lord Mayor’s spring revel, the night of the eighteenth,” Seila replied. “It’s supposed to be a grand affair this year; everybody will be there. I expect to attend with my family, however, so it may be difficult to smuggle you inside.”

“We have three days to think of something,” Jack said. He was not concerned; there wasn’t a ball, masquerade, or debut he couldn’t crash if he put his mind to it. On the other hand, the mention of Seila’s father brought another thought to mind. “As long as we have a moment, my dear, do you know of a reason why your father would be interested in a magic tome? Specifically, a book called the Sarkonagael?”

“The what?”

“The Sarkonagael. It is a book of shadow magic.”

“No, I have never heard of it. What does my father have to do with it?” Seila asked.

“He offered a very substantial reward for its recovery,” said Jack. He started to add more, but the next scene began with a fanfare of trumpets, and Seila looked back toward the stage. The rogue turned his attention from the audience on the floor of the house to the box seats on the opposite wall, studying each in turn with great care;

now that his eyes were adjusted to the dim light, he could make out more of the room.

At the next interval of dialogue in the production, Seila belatedly replied to Jack. “My father sponsors adventurers from time to time,” she whispered. “If he offered a reward for some old book, I’m sure he had a good reason.”

“I hope so. The Sarkonagael has something of a sinister reputation.”

“Are you accusing my father of dabbling in dark magic?” Seila asked sharply.

“I said nothing of the sort,” Jack quickly said. “It’s simply that I have personal experience of the Sarkonagael, and it is frankly dangerous. I would like to know what your father wants it for.”

“Am I supposed to question him about it?” Seila turned in her seat to glare at Jack. “Exactly how should I broach the matter, Jack? ‘Father, the Landsgrave Jaer Kell Wildhame suspects you of collecting forbidden tomes. Can you give some account of yourself?’ ”

“Your father may be involved in something … unpleasant,” Jack replied. “Is that so hard to imagine? Many men of his station and position are.”

“As far as I know, he hasn’t answered to no less than three different names in my hearing, or pretended to be lord of any imaginary domains!”

Jack winced. “Very well,” he said. “I retract the question; your father’s interests are none of my concern. Let us put it behind us.”

Seila sat in silence for a long moment, her face turned away from his. Finally, she took a deep breath, and said, “I think you had better go now.”

“Now, Seila, I only asked a simple question about …” Jack began, but he did not finish the thought. Seila’s arms were crossed, and she stared stonily at the opera unfolding below. Jack had great confidence in his powers of persuasion, but he sensed that there was little he could say that would retrieve the situation. He grimaced, surprised to find that he was honestly hurt by her temporary rejection.

With as much dignity as he could muster, he stood and bowed. “I am sorry for this … misunderstanding. Whatever you may think of me, please be careful, Seila. Dark designs are at work in the city, and I am not at the bottom of all of them.” Then he let himself out of the box, leaving Seila to her anger.

“Jack, you fool,” he muttered to himself. “That was poorly done.” It seemed his evening at the opera was at an unfortunately early end.

He paused in the stairwell to alter his appearance, just in case he ran into any of the well-heeled folk he’d met at the historical society, the theater opening, or Lady Moonbrace’s tea. He changed his hair color, thickened his nose, and added twenty years of lines and crow’s-feet to his face, then proceeded to the lobby. Seila’s suspicion was a disappointment, to say the least. Somehow he would have to find his way back into her good graces, but other events would seem to suggest that the best thing he could do for the moment was to drop out of sight. With the wizard Tarandor and Dresimil’s dark elf warriors both looking for him, the lower his profile, the better. Matters were entirely out of hand; he could hardly make a show of repairing his good name when he dared not show his face in public.

He descended the stairs to the house’s lobby and spied a wine steward arranging his service at one side of the room. Jack crossed the gleaming marble floor, eying a goblet of Chessentan red. “Five talents, sir,” the steward said.

“Half a crown for a cup of mediocre wine?” Jack grumbled, but he fished the necessary coinage out of his purse and paid the fellow. He was not the only audience member up and out of his seat; a handful of others were in search of refreshment, or on their way to or from the powder rooms. Putting his back to the wall, he turned to watch the fine folk come and go—and then he saw Fetterfist. The tall, yellow-haired lord wore a tunic of blue with a great gold chain and a shapeless blue hat; he had a pair of striking beauties on his arms, one with dark hair and the other with hair of burnished copper.

Quickly Jack turned back to the wine steward and gestured discretely at the unknown lord. “Who is that fellow in blue, the one with the redhead and brunette in his company?” he asked the servant.

The steward gave a small shrug. “Why, I am not sure if I remember his name.” Jack produced a gold crown and pressed it into the steward’s hand. “Ah, wait, now it comes to me,” the steward continued. “That is Lord Cailek Balathorp, of the Balathorp family. His companions I do not recognize, but he seems to be in different company each time he attends.”

“My thanks,” Jack said drily. He stood watching Balathorp—Fetterfist—while he considered his various difficulties … and then a bold idea came to him. He examined the notion carefully, considering it in all its aspects, and nodded firmly to himself. Two different parties wished to deprive Jack of his freedom; very well, he would see to it that their ambitions were fulfilled, so that perhaps they might leave him in peace.

Draining the last of his cup, Jack ambled toward Balathorp and gave a small bow. “My lord, might I have a discreet word with you?”

Balathorp glanced at Jack with a look of annoyance. “Do I know you?” he asked.

“No, my lord, but we share certain business interests.”

“I do not attend the opera to discuss business.”

“I will not take much of your time.” Jack raised a hand to his chest, and made a show of wrapping the fingers of the other around his wrist as if to massage an ache … or to imitate a manacle.

Balathorp’s eyes narrowed, but he acceded. “Mirta, Saneyn, excuse me for just a moment,” he said to his companions. He followed as Jack drew him aside to a quiet corner of the room, where no one else stood within earshot. After a quick glance around, the tall lord scowled at Jack and said, “This had better be important. I never permit my business interests to intrude in the social circles I customarily inhabit.”

“Do you know Jack Ravenwild? Sometimes called Jaer Kell Wildhame?”

“The rescuer of Seila Norwood. What of him?”

“Our friends in Chûmavhraele are anxious to get their hands on him.”

Balathorp hesitated. “Who are you?”

“Let us say we share an employer,” Jack replied. “What would you say if I were to tell you that I can have Ravenwild waiting for you at the warehouse of Mumfort and Company in Bitterstone—say, the night of the seventeenth at midnight?”

“I would wonder why you needed me.”

“Transportation of goods, my dear sir. It is your area of expertise, is it not?” Jack pressed on quickly; intermission had been announced, and audience members by the dozens were beginning to arrive in the lobby. “I can get Ravenwild to the warehouse and have him ready to be moved. All you need do is take him … downstairs. I understand there is a substantial reward for his capture. Are you interested?” That last remark about a reward was simple speculation on his part, of course, but he thought it had a certain plausibility; if Dresimil was willing to send her warriors up into the streets of Raven’s Bluff, she was likely willing to pay well for his return if someone else arranged it.

“I am well aware of the reward for Ravenwild,” Balathorp answered, confirming Jack’s guess. “But how do you profit from this arrangement?”

“I am well paid for my services,” Jack said with a sly smile. “You might say I am on retainer.”

Balathorp—Fetterfist—studied Jack for a long moment, his eyes cold as steel. “The fact remains that I do not know you, and have no real reason to trust you,” he finally said.

“You will have to accustom yourself to the former condition. I have reason to avoid giving you my name. As for the latter …” Jack gave a small shrug. “You are regarded as a reliable fellow, and I would be happy to employ you. But if you are not interested, I can find someone else.”

Balathorp glanced around at the increasing crowd, and lowered his voice. “Fine: Mumfort’s, two nights from now, twelve bells.”

“Excellent,” Jack replied. He nodded and began to leave, but Balathorp reached out with one long-fingered hand and grasped him by the upper arm. The slaver’s grip was strong, and he did not spare his strength.

“I have my ways of getting to the bottom of things,” the tall lord murmured. “If you wind up wasting my time, I will find out who you are, and you will have cause to regret trifling with me. And one last thing—never approach me in public again.” Then he released Jack and headed back to rejoin his companions.

Jack surreptitiously rubbed at his arm, and allowed himself a smile. “One down,” he remarked to himself. Then he let himself out of Rundelstone and headed into the gloomy night.



Putting his unfortunate argument with Seila out of his mind for the moment, Jack hurried back to the Smoke Wyrm with a tentative answer to his difficulties taking shape in his mind. The night was damp, cool, and windy; a waning moon peeked through fast-scudding clouds from time to time, but otherwise the sky was dark and starless. He retained his nondescript magical guise until he reached Vesper Way, just in case anyone with sinister intentions toward him was skulking about in the shadowed alleyways and looking for a wiry, dark-haired, dark-goateed fellow with a confident manner and impeccable taste in clothing. No dark elf war parties or cabals of scheming wizards put in an appearance, so Jack deemed his precautions a success and trotted down the steps to Tharzon’s tap-room.

The Smoke Wyrm was as full as Jack had seen it. Close to twoscore laborers, clerks, touts, merchants’ wives, and dancing girls crowded the room, all of them speaking loudly at once to be heard over the energetic strumming of a trio of minstrels who played by the far wall. It was a merry little scene, and Jack had half a mind to join in the revels for an hour or two … but he had serious business to attend, and there would be time for good ale and dancing later. He paused to study the crowd and spied the brawny half-orc Narm against the wall, nursing a mug of Old Smoky.

Jack made his way over to the swordsman and inclined his head. “Narm, I believe you are just the fellow I am looking for,” he began. “Did you get your cut from Tharzon?”

“Not a quarter-hour ago,” Narm answered. He patted his left side; there was a jingle of mail and a clink of coin. “Tharzon called me over as soon as I walked in the door. A good thing, too, because I was beginning to wonder whether you had a notion to play us false.”

“Such a notion never crossed my mind,” Jack said nervously, belatedly asking himself if Narm was in fact the fellow he needed at the moment. “I merely retained the book until I was certain the entire sum was forthcoming.”

Narm nodded. “A wise precaution. When one agrees to perform a dangerous task in exchange for a certain sum of gold, one expects to be paid.”

“I agree wholeheardedly,” Jack replied. There was no need to bring up the additional fee he’d negotiated for the Sarkonagael’s return. “Now, speaking of employment … would the Blue Wyverns be interested in assisting me the night after next, around nine bells? I need to arrange a difficult transaction, and I am willing to pay each of you fifty gold crowns for your time and trouble.”

The big swordsman scratched at his stubble-covered chin. “In light of the mortal danger we encountered on our last venture, we’ll need to be paid in advance. And I’ll be the judge of whether fifty crowns is enough for your job. Now, what do you have in mind?”

“Let us find a place to speak more privately, and perhaps see if Kurzen is interested as well,” Jack answered. The rogue and the sellsword moved over to the crowded bar, where Tharzon’s son and a pair of human barkeeps worked to keep the mugs and pitchers of the Smoke Wyrm’s customers full.

Kurzen glanced up and saw Jack and Narm waiting. He gave them a small nod, wiping his hands on his apron. “Back again, Jack? I thought you were off to the opera or some such business this evening.”

Narm glanced down at Jack. “The opera?” he asked.

“I am a cultured man. Besides, that’s where the rich people can be found.”

“I see that another scheme is afoot,” said Kurzen. “Speak quickly, if you please—we’re a mite busy this evening.”

“This shouldn’t be more than a few moments of your time, friend Kurzen,” Jack replied. “Do you have a quiet place to talk?”

The dwarf glanced at the room and the waiting customers. “Hold down the bar, lads,” he said to the barkeeps. Then he came out from around the bar and led Jack and Narm to the kegroom where Jack had spoken to Tharzon earlier. Several of the big kegs were lying empty on the floor, which was now wet and slick with spillage. Jack was impressed; they went through a good deal of ale at the Smoke Wyrm, or so it seemed. Kurzen wiped his hands on his apron and glanced around once to make sure no one else was in earshot. “Well, Jack, what’s on your mind?” he said.

“I need some help in convincing some persistent enemies to leave me alone.”

“It’ll cost you more than fifty crowns to hire me as an assassin,” Narm muttered.

“That is not precisely what I was planning,” Jack replied. “I wish to retain you for security.”

He went on to describe the situations with Tarandor and the dark elves while Narm and Kurzen listened closely. At length the half-orc made a counteroffer, and after some negotiation, they settled on a price of four hundred gold crowns for the participation of Kurzen and the Company of the Blue Wyvern.

“Good enough,” the dwarf grunted. “But let’s have half in advance, if you please.”

“Aye, half in advance,” Narm agreed. Jack started to protest, but the half-orc only smiled. “You’ve just told us that two different bands of foes are looking for you. If they catch you, Kurzen and I will have nothing for our troubles.”

“Fine, then,” Jack grumbled. He grudgingly paid half the agreed sum in advance. He tried to reassure himself with the thought that if his little ploy worked, it would be money well spent; neither dark elf assassins nor officious wizards would have any more reason to

haunt his steps. “After all, is that not how men of means defeat their troubles?” he asked himself. “Any problem that can be solved with something as simple as a bag of gold crowns is not much of a problem at all, really.”

“What was that?” Narm asked, pausing in his count of coins.

“A philosophical observation, and nothing more,” Jack replied.

“It depends whether you have a bag of gold or not,” Kurzen answered. “And of course some complaints can’t be addressed by any amount of coin.” He scooped up his share of the coins, and stood. “I have to get back to my work or my da will never let me hear the end of it.”

“Remember, the warehouse of Mumfort and Company, nine bells on the evening of the seventeeth,” Jack said again. “I will meet you there.”

“Nine bells,” Narm agreed. “Until the day after tomorrow, then,” he said. Kurzen nodded in agreement and led the way back to the crowded taproom. Jack took his leave of the Smoke Wyrm for the evening, hurrying back to the tiny little suite above the disused tinsmith’s shop.

He passed the rest of the evening in a close study of the spell he’d cut from the Sarkonagael, reading the magical pages in the lightless room. Tharzon’s bolthole was not a particularly comfortable place to study; the roof leaked, and there was a peculiarly strong musty odor that seemed to emerge in the rain and damp of the evening. However, the place served its purpose of providing Jack with a place to work out of the sight of those who did not mean him well. Jack had given the shadow-simulacrum spell only a cursory examination while entrapped in Tarandor Delhame’s bottle. Jack soon discovered that, as he’d thought, the spell was more of a ritual than the sort of spell one might actually memorize. The procedure itself seemed relatively straightforward, but some of the finer details taxed him sorely. By the early hours of morning he’d satisfied his curiosity enough to seek a few hours’ sleep on the narrow, hard bed.

Jack awoke to another cold, overcast morning; a steady drizzle grayed the streets and buildings around Jack’s retreat. He made his

breakfast on a pair of sweet rolls and a quart of fresh milk from a nearby bakery, while he carefully composed a brief note and sealed it in a small envelope. Then he dressed himself in the plainest and most ordinary of the clothes remaining from the fine wardrobe created by Grigor Silverstitch—dark blue breeches with a matching vest, a shirt of white Turmishan cotton, a broad-brimmed hat of the same hue as the breeches, and a cape of light gray. He tucked his note into his vest pocket, then he worked his spell of disguise, making himself taller and lanker, changing his hair to a dirty straw color, removing his goatee, and making his jawline broad and bony. When he finished, he checked his appearance in the mirror and grinned in approval; it was a good likeness of Cailek Balathorp. Then he set out into the rainy morning.

He headed south through Torchtown until he reached Evensong Ride, then strolled through Holyhouses and Swordspoint. At MacIntyre he turned left, with a small twinge of trepidation—the smoldering ruins of Maldridge were just a block or two ahead, and there was a very small chance that anyone looking for Jack might stake out the burned manor on the off chance he returned to dig through the rubble. But before he reached Maldridge or any likely imaginary spies watching for him, he came to the High House of Magic and trotted up the rain-slick steps to the door.

After one quick tug at his garments to adjust the fit, Jack knocked on the great black door. There was a long pause, then Jack heard measured footfalls from the hallway within. The heavy door swung open, revealing the tiefling chamberlain—Marzam, was that his name?—dressed in a fine black coat. The grave-looking tiefling studied Jack for a moment, and then asked, “May I help you, sir?”

“Is Master Tarandor here today?” Jack asked.

“I believe so, sir. If you’ll wait a moment—”

“No need, my good fellow.” Jack drew his note from his breast pocket and presented it to the chamberlain. “Please deliver this to him at once. It is a matter that interests him greatly.”

Marzam gave Jack a dubious look, but he accepted the envelope. “I will see to it,” he said.

“Very good,” Jack answered. He turned and trotted back down the steps; behind him, the tiefling watched him depart, then returned inside. The rogue turned south on MacIntyre and crossed Evensong Ride, making for a building just two short blocks down from the High House of Magic. A faded yellow door stood under the sign of a great black pot; Jack went inside. Back in his day, the Kettle of Many Things had been a fine little restaurant. After a hundred years, it was now a tavern that catered to the city’s working folk with filling fare and inexpensive ale and wine. Jack took a seat at a table by the window, ordered a mug of weak beer, and settled in to wait, hoping the tiefling hadn’t just tossed the note as soon as he closed the door. It was midmorning; the Kettle was quiet, with only two or three other customers minding their own business.

A quarter-hour later, the wizard Tarandor Delhame hurried through the door, sweeping the room with his eyes. Jack, of course, still wore Balathorp’s face, but he’d drawn his hat low over his face in a show of discretion. He signaled the wizard with a motion of his hand. Tarandor frowned, but he crossed the room and slid into the bench opposite Jack. “Are you the one who left me the note at the High House?” he asked.

“I am,” Jack replied, performing a good imitation of Balathorp’s deep and mellifluous tone. “I hope I did not cause you any great inconvenience, Master Tarandor.”

“If what your note claimed is true, then it is no inconvenience at all.” The wizard studied his face, evidently trying to place it. “You seem to have me at a disadvantage. Who are you?”

“A simple man of business. Some call me Fetterfist.”

Tarandor’s eyes narrowed. “The slaver,” he said flatly. “Your reputation precedes you.”

“We all do what we must to get by.”

“Why did you seek me out?”

“I heard that you are very interested in this Jack Ravenwild fellow. I can deliver him to you.”

The abjurer frowned. “My interest is hardly public knowledge. How did you learn that I was seeking him?”

Jack gave a small shrug. “I had a little conversation with the fire-mage Halamar at that taphouse he favors last night. You might say we have some mutual acquaintances. Now, I am sure you are a busy man, and I have many things to attend today as well, so allow me to get to the point: I have Ravenwild, and I’ll sell him to you for two thousand gold crowns.”

“Two thousand—” the abjurer spluttered. “Why, you don’t understand! He poses a dire threat to the safety of the entire city. I must take him into custody as a public service.”

Jack took a long sip from his beer. “Do I look as if I am interested in performing public services?” he asked. “You are not the only party interested in this fellow, you know. The drow would love to get their hands on him, too, and they’ll pay me that much or more.”

“No, don’t do that! The dark elves may not follow the necessary procedures, and I will never be free of this detestable duty.” Tarandor scowled, but after a moment he nodded. “Fine. Two thousand crowns, then. Where is he?”

Jack stood and hid a smile. That last bit about asking for money was pure inspiration of the moment; the idea that Tarandor would pay for the privilege of being duped was exquisite. He should have asked for more. “Meet me at ten bells tomorrow night at the icehouse on Black Visor Street,” he said. “I’ll have him all bundled up and ready for you. And don’t forget the coin. Now, are we agreed?”

“It would be better to hand him over immediately.”

“I have some arrangements to make first. But never you fear, Master Tarandor. I will keep him safe until we deliver him to you.”

The wizard sighed. Jack almost felt sorry for him; the fellow seemed very anxious about the fact that Jack was not imprisoned in the mythal stone at this very instant. “I agree,” he said. “I’ll be at the icehouse at ten bells. Be warned that I will be well protected by magic.”

“Of course,” Jack said, with an insincere smile. He inclined his head to the abjurer, and left the Kettle.

Once outside, Jack took a quick turn down the nearest alleyway, then used his spell of shadow-stepping to teleport himself several

blocks away. He changed his appearance again with his disguise spell, taking on the semblance of an olive-skinned Chessentan freebooter with hair of curly black and a brightly checkered cape. “Tarandor might be tempted to employ spells of scrying,” he told himself. “It seems wise to make sure he does not find me if he does.”

Satisfied that he’d given any magical spies the slip, Jack threw himself into a whole host of special errands for the day. He visited various apothecaries across the city until he found one that carried the somewhat illicit essence that was at the top of his shopping list. He stopped by the icehouse and the warehouse of Mumfort and Company to arrange his use of the facilities the next night, which mostly involved making sure he could break in when he wanted to and that no night watchmen were going to be on hand. He bought several of the leading handbills from the criers hawking them on the streets, looking for any reports about the Sarkonagael or Maldridge’s destruction and whether he was wanted in connection with either; nothing was in the news about the book, but the fire at Maldridge was quite prominent. He went by Albrath’s counting house to confirm the payment of the Sarkonagael’s reward, and finally finished with a long and expensive visit to a dealer in magical reagents and spell components.

Jack didn’t return to the tinsmith’s shop until four bells in the afternoon. He took one careful look around to make sure no one was watching the place, then let himself in, hurried up the steps to the upstairs rooms, and dumped out on the uneven table in the middle of the room the assorted reagents he’d bought. Quickly he organized the collection of jars, vials, and paper wrappings, making sure he knew what each one was. This would be a challenging piece of work, and accuracy was absolutely essential.

“Careful now, Jack,” he told himself. “Slow and steady, not a step out of place, not a word omitted.” Then he drew the folded pages of the Sarkonagael’s shadow-duplicate spell from his pocket, smoothed them on the table in front of him, and began to perform the ritual.

Steady rain pattered down around Jack and the Blue Wyverns as they pushed a borrowed cart through the dark streets of the Bitterstone neighborhood. The halfling Arlith went ahead of the small party, scouting for trouble, but they stuck to the alleyways as much as possible—Jack did not want to blunder into the city watch with the cart's contents. He had an idea or two for how he might handle an unexpected encounter, but it would be much easier to avoid any such embarrassment altogether. Fortunately, the warehouse districts tended to be quiet and lightly trafficked after dark, and the weather further helped them to pass without notice.

Ulwhe's Icehouse loomed up out of the fog and rain, and Jack allowed himself a sly grin. "Ah, here we are, my friends," he said. "Bring the cart around to the alley side, and I'll let us in."

"Be quick about it," Narm grumbled. "I'd like to get out of this damned rain." Jack motioned for him to follow; the half-orc put his shoulder to the cart, while Kurzen leaned into the other side. They wheeled the cart around the corner of the building to the loading dock at the rear, while Jack went to a back window and pulled it open—he'd made sure to unlock it during his visit earlier in the day. He climbed inside and had the back door open in a moment.

"Bring our sleeping prince inside," he told his comrades. Narm and Kurzen drew aside the old sailcloth covering the cart, revealing a bound and hooded figure underneath. The dwarf and the half-orc picked up the motionless captive by his feet and underarms and hurried into the icehouse. Halamar and Arlith followed after; with one last glance up and down the street, Jack closed the door. "This way."

Jack led the way through the storage area as Narm and Kurzen lugged the unconscious man after him. The icehouse was full of layer after layer of great blocks of ice, separated by layers of straw. In midspring, the supply of blocks cut in the winter months hadn't yet been drawn down or melted off by very much—the place was full almost to the rafters. Jack had picked out a spot in the building's business office, a room not quite so damp or chilly as the ice storage area because it was separated by a thick door. He

pointed to a clear spot, and his companions stretched out the motionless body on the wooden floor.

"So who do we have here?" asked Halamar. "Is Tarandor interested in him, too?"

"He will be," Jack promised. "Now, if you'll excuse me, it's time to don my disguise. Our colleague may be here at any moment." He brought to mind his tried and true spell of disguise, and wove a new appearance for himself—taller, paler, with long lank yellow hair and a strong jaw. In the space of a few moments he stood six inches taller; he took care to adjust his clothes to what he'd been wearing when he met Tarandor at the Kettle.

"Now that is a handy trick," Kurzen grunted. "If you can do that, why go to all this trouble? Give yourself a new semblance every few hours, and no one would ever find you when you don't want to be found."

"Because, friend Kurzen, I am fond of my own face and do not care to spend the rest of my days hiding it from sight," Jack answered. "Halamar, if I may be so bold, perhaps you had better find a place to hide. If Tarandor sees you here, he will naturally wonder how and why you are involved."

"As you wish," the fire-mage replied. He chose a closet in the office, and ducked inside.

"Do you expect any trouble from this wizard?" Narm asked Jack.

"No, but it would be wise to be prepared, anyway. I doubt Tarandor will attempt to steal his prize rather than pay for it, but a show of vigilance on our part may be just the thing to dissuade him."

They waited for a time, Arlith keeping watch from the office window and Kurzen stationing himself by the back door. Half an hour crept by, and Jack began to wonder if Tarandor had reconsidered the whole business. But finally, as the temple chimes throughout the city struck ten bells, Arlith gave a small signal and hopped down from her perch by the window. A knock came at the icehouse's door. Jack straightened his tunic, tugged at his cuffs, and went to answer the door.

In the yellow lamplight of the street outside stood Tarandor, along with two of his apprentices—the bearded young man and the Calishite. “Ah, good evening, Master Tarandor,” Jack said warmly. “I commend you on your punctuality.”

The wizard gave him a brusque nod, and peered past Jack at the room beyond. “Who are they?” he asked, looking at Arlith, Narm, and Kurzen.

“Have no fear, Tarandor. They are simply my employees,” Jack answered. “And who do you have with you?”

“My apprentices,” the lean wizard replied. “Do you have him?”

“If by ‘him’ you mean Ravenwild, well, see for yourself.” Jack stepped out of the way and indicated the man on the floor with a sweep of his arm.

Tarandor glanced once more at the others waiting in the room, and strode inside with his apprentices crowding behind him. He frowned down at the bound figure at his feet. “Remove his hood. I need to be certain of his identity.”

Jack motioned to Narm. The big swordsman knelt by the figure on the floor and quickly undid the hood covering the face. The man unconscious on the floor was Jack’s twin, with the same dark hair, the same pointed chin, and the same neatly trimmed goatee. The rogue allowed himself a well-deserved smile of satisfaction; the Sarkonagael had not failed him. It was more than a little disconcerting to stare down at his own familiar features on another’s body, but he was a fine-looking fellow, after all—his simulacrum would have cause to be grateful for its good looks if it ever had reason to wake.

“Are you satisfied?” Jack asked.

The lean abjurer studied the unconscious man on the floor with a frown of concern. “You haven’t killed him, have you?” he asked.

“I understood that you wanted him alive,” Jack replied. “Ravenwild’s had a good strong whiff of yellow musk extract, that’s all. He might not stir from his slumber for a day or two.”

Tarandor knelt by the unconscious man, leaning forward to examine him. “I see that you gagged him, anyway.”

“He is said to be a sorcerer of some elusiveness.” Jack smiled with just the right combination of heartlessness and greed. “Ravenwild is known to employ a teleport spell that requires but a single word, so if I were you, I would exercise caution and keep him gagged all the way to your destination, whatever it might be. Don’t be taken in by any demonstration or struggles, no matter how energetic. A moment of compassion, and you may lose him all over again.”

“Have no fear on that score,” Tarandor replied. He straightened up and brushed off his hands, then motioned for his apprentices to come forward. “Begin your preparations,” he told them.

“First things first,” Jack said. “Do you have my coin?”

Tarandor produced a good-sized coinpurse with a frown of distaste, and set it on a table. Jack nodded to Arlith, who undid the drawstring and poured out a few dozen gleaming gold crowns. “Very good,” Jack said. “Ravenwild is yours, Master Tarandor.”

The younger wizards carefully set a familiar green bottle beside the unconscious man and set to work drawing a magic circle on the floor around him. The abjurer supervised their work, checking each mark and glyph they chalked on the floor. Jack took a surreptitious step backward, and then another; he did not care to take any chance that whatever magic Tarandor was planning might catch the wrong Jack Ravenwild.

“My information is not complete,” Jack observed, “but I understand that you mean to take him to the dark elf ruins below the city?”

The abjurer gave Jack a sharp glance. “You are better informed than I expected.”

Jack gave a low chuckle. “The wizard at the Smoke Wyrm was somewhat in his cups the other night.”

“I shall have to have a stern word with Master Halamar regarding the confidentiality of wizardly affairs.”

“The fault was not entirely his,” Jack replied. “I furnished him with a pint or two of Old Smoky when the conversation began to take an interesting turn. After all, it is my business to smell out this sort of … opportunity … when it comes along. In any event, if you mean to carry him down to Chûmavhraele, I advise you to approach

the dark elves directly and deal with them in a forthright manner. The drow are a pragmatic folk, and it is merely a matter of setting the price to purchase their cooperation."

"In other words, I must pay to take possession of this wretched sorcerer, and then pay to be rid of him?" Tarandor said with a sour expression.

"Far be it from me to meddle in the affairs of wizards," Jack replied.

"We are ready, master," one of the apprentices said. They were finished with the arcane diagram surrounding the man on the floor; the bottle with its great black stopper waited nearby. Jack noticed that the green bottle was now encircled with a fishnet-like covering of fine silver chain, and the stopper was covered with potent silver glyphs; evidently Tarandor meant to ensure that no one would teleport out of it this time.

Tarandor briefly inspected the circle, and nodded in approval. "Stand back and remain still, if you please," he said to Jack and the other Blue Wyverns. Jack obliged by taking several steps back. The abjurer murmured a lengthy spell under his breath, weaving his hands in sweeping motions as he spoke, until he finished the last syllables of the spell. There was a shower of greenish-silver sparks that whirled around the unconscious duplicate on the floor. Jack caught a glimpse of some impossible movement, and then the magic circle on the floor was empty, while the bottle smoked and rocked back and forth. One of the apprentices stooped quickly and jammed the stopper in the bottle with a very final *thunk*.

"Astonishing," Jack observed. "I would have simply carried him down to the Underdark while bound and drugged."

"There are arcane hazards at work here that must be reckoned with," Tarandor replied. The abjurer checked on the bottle, where Jack thought he could see a tiny black-clad form lying bound and gagged on the fine white sand, and then motioned for his apprentices to secure the case. "Our business here is done," he said to Jack. "This was an exceptional meeting, but it is now concluded, and I have no desire to continue our association. Do not contact me again."

“I shall abide by your wishes,” Jack replied. He gave a formal bow as Tarandor and his apprentices filed out of the room.

Arlith saw them to the door and watched for a long moment. “They’re gone,” she finally announced.

Narm and Kurzen sighed in relief. Halamar emerged from the closet where he had been hiding. “Do you think the dark elves will let him anywhere near their mythal?” the sorcerer asked.

“I have no idea,” said Jack. “If they do, then Tarandor will inter my double in the stone. If they choose not to, I expect they’ll kill my double in some gruesome fashion. Either way, Tarandor’s business in Raven’s Bluff is concluded, and he’ll be on his way back to Iriaebor where he’ll never trouble me again.”

“The drow might kill him or take him prisoner instead,” Kurzen pointed out.

“A chance I’m willing to take,” said Jack. “Speaking of which, our work for the night is only half-done. We should be on our way.” He scooped up Tarandor’s bag of gold and slipped it into his shirt, leaving the mysterious chalked circle on the floor of the office. No doubt Ulwhe and his employees would be quite mystified in the morning, but that was hardly Jack’s concern. They reclaimed the cart on which they’d carried Jack’s simulacrum to the icehouse, and set off through the rainy streets again.

Mumfort and Company was only a couple of streets over from the icehouse. No one was abroad on such a dismal night, and they saw no one as they made their way through the darkened warehouses. As before, they left the cart by the building’s back door, and let themselves inside. They spread out to search the place and make certain no unpleasant surprises were waiting for them before gathering again in the room where Jack had been trapped by the symbol.

“Do your plans for Fetterfist remain unchanged?” asked Halamar.

“More or less,” Jack replied. “I am open to suggestions, if you have any. Otherwise it’s merely a matter of finding good places to hide, and waiting.”

The small party took the next half-hour or so to study the warehouse layout, reposition a few crates and kegs in useful places,

and consider any number of contingencies that might arise. Then they settled in to wait, posting Arlith as a lookout again by the front door and Halamar by the rear entrance. Jack found himself worrying over whether Balathorp would show, and wondered what he would do next if the slaver arrived an hour or two late, or simply didn't appear at all. But it turned out that his fears were ungrounded; Arlith stirred at her watchpost almost a quarter-hour before the stroke of twelve bells.

"Three men are approaching," Arlith whispered. "One looks like he might be the tall yellow-haired fellow you described."

"Three?" Jack repeated. He grimaced; of course Balathorp wouldn't have come alone.

"You only mentioned one man when we settled a price last night," Narm growled. "This, of course, must be taken into account."

"Nonsense," Jack replied. "This is the sort of unexpected development that might arise in any business transaction. We are all exposed to unanticipated risks."

"In that case, you are free to deal with all three slavers as you wish," Narm replied.

"That is unfortunate," said Jack with a great show of patience, "since we agreed the balance of your payment for the night was contingent upon Fetterfist's capture."

"Enough, both of you," Halamar whispered. "We can manage all three easily enough, but not if they hear us arguing from the street. To your places."

The half-orc swordsman frowned, but he moved to stand beside Jack. Kurzen hid in a dark space between two large stacks of crates; Halamar in another one farther from the door. Arlith came down from her window and took up a place by the warehouse door. For his own part, Jack drew a blindfold over his eyes—seemingly opaque, but merely translucent—and knelt beside Narm with his hands locked together behind his back, loops of cord loose around his wrists. In his right fist he hid one of the expensive vials he'd purchased during his hectic morning preparations, wrapped in a fine silk cloth. A moment later there was a sharp knock at the warehouse door. Jack adopted an attitude of defeat, allowing his

shoulders to slump and his head to nod on his chest. Narm's callused hand settled on his shoulder, as if holding him upright.

Arlith gave the small company a wink and opened the door for Balathorp. The slaver wore the same leather hood Jack had seen him wearing in Chûmavhraele; gone were the fine clothes and effete manners of the nobleman. One of the ruffians with him was a short, hairy fellow with black hair and long arms and the other was a tiefling with skin the color of charcoal. "Well, we are here," the slaver announced. "Do you have my wares?"

The halfling looked up at the tall human and snorted. "About time. We've been waiting for an hour."

"Take that up with the fellow who made the arrangements, not me," Balathorp answered. His eyes fell on Jack, kneeling beside Narm, flicked to the half-orc, and then returned to the halfling. "So where is our mysterious go-between, anyway? I don't know either of you."

Narm shrugged. "All I know is that we were paid to bring this poor wretch—" he slapped the side of Jack's head hard enough to make Jack's ears ring—"to this warehouse and wait for someone called Fetterfist. Is that you?"

The slaver stood in the doorway for a long moment, and Jack wondered if he was going to back out. Then he shrugged and stepped inside, his thugs following close behind him. "Let's see if this is who I think it is," he remarked, and approached Jack. He reached out to pull up the blindfold and peer into Jack's face … and at that instant Jack crushed the vial with the yellow musk extract in his hand and shoved the seeping cloth up under Balathorp's nose, while seizing the slaver's tunic with the other hand to hold him close.

Jack had taken the precaution of slipping plugs in his nostrils ahead of time, and he was careful to hold his breath … but even so, the faintest whiff of the extract's aroma tickled his nose, and his head swam as if he'd been drinking half the night. Balathorp cried out in surprise and protest, but in the process he couldn't help but to draw a breath of the potent aroma. The remaining two ruffians cursed and went for their weapons, but now the Company of the

Blue Wyvern leaped out of ambush. Arlith, who stood by the door momentarily forgotten, expertly kicked the legs of the black-haired thug out from under him even though he was twice her size. Narm leaped past Balathorp to pummel the tiefling furiously, his fist wrapped around a solid lead slug. Kurzen charged out of his hiding-place and clubbed the black-haired thug with a short truncheon as the fellow tried to roll to his feet. The thug managed to draw a knife, but the dwarf smashed it out of his fingers with one blow of the club and knocked him senseless with the second and third. Meanwhile, Balathorp's furious struggles ceased, and his knees began to buckle. Jack kept the soporific extract right under the slaver's nose and eased him to the floor.

The tiefling roared in anger and summoned up a blast of infernal fire as Narm struck at him, driving back the half-orc for a moment. He turned and started for the door, but Arlith leaped up, took two quick steps, and yanked the tiefling to the warehouse floor by his cloak. Kurzen and Narm set in at the devil-blooded ruffian immediately, and in a few short moments the last of the slavers was unconscious on the floor. Halamar extinguished the tiefling's fire with a wave of his hand, and the building fell silent.

"By Cyric's black heart, that stuff is *strong*, Jack," Arlith said. The halfling raised a hand to cover her mouth and nose as she climbed to her feet. "I can feel it from over here."

"It should be, given how much I paid for it," Jack said. He'd nearly drugged himself earlier in the day when he'd applied the stuff to the simulacrum he created. Removing his false blindfold, he carefully took the crushed vial and the damp cloth and dropped them both into a small leather pouch before cinching it tight. "Quite expensive, but far and away the best tool for the job."

"Best to secure him, anyway, and the others as well," Narm said.

"Of course. I am noted for my attention to detail," said Jack. He relieved Fetterfist of his sword, dagger, and boots (just in case there were any hidden blades or compartments in the heels), removed a sturdy leather pouch from the slaver's belt, and pocketed his coinpurse, too. Then he produced a sturdy length of cord from

under his cloak and made sure Fetterfist was tightly bound, while Arlith and Kurzen saw to Fetterfist's associates.

"That was simple enough," Halamar observed when they'd finished. "Now what do we do with them?"

"Now we summon the watch."

"Summon the watch?" the sorcerer cried in amazement. "Whatever for?"

"Why, to deliver the notorious slaver Fetterfist to the forces of law and order and unmask him as the traitorous lord Cailek Balathorp." Jack drew a large envelope out of his pocket and laid it atop the unconscious slaver. "This is a little note explaining his various crimes and misdemeanors. I also took the liberty of claiming credit for his capture."

"You are simply going to give up a prisoner as valuable as this fellow to the watch?" Narm said. "And make an enemy of the Balathorps, as well? You did not mention the rest of us by name in that letter, did you?"

"Your anonymity is assured, friend Narm. And I do not look at this as giving up a valuable chip for nothing—I mean to buy back Norwood's favor with Balathorp, here."

"If that's the case, it would be better to drop this fellow on Norwood's doorstep in the dark of night," Kurzen said thoughtfully. "You'd have a better chance of claiming the credit without the involvement of the watch."

Jack shrugged. "Norwood might have me murdered on sight by his guards after the whole unfortunate business with Maldridge. I thought it best to arrange a gift for him before showing myself at Norwood Manor."

The Blue Wyverns exchanged skeptical glances, but offered no more arguments. Jack nodded to himself and gave Balathorp's coinpurse a jingle. "Now, I do not know about the rest of you, but I find that my labors this evening have left me with a great thirst. Shall we find some friendly establishment to celebrate our successes? Cailek Balathorp has generously offered to buy the first round."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next day, after numerous rounds at the Smoke Wyrm and one final uncomfortable night on the hard, narrow plank that served as the bed in the room above the tinsmith's shop, Jack took his duffel of clothing and his momentarily full purse to an inn billing itself as the Ravenstrand Arms on North Road. The place was half-full, with a mercantile clientele that included Sembian importers, Dalesfolk traders, and even a pair of traveling arms merchants from distant Mulmaster. For his own part, Jack passed himself off as a lord's agent from Calaunt, tasked with inspecting his master's investments in Raven's Bluff. He gave the innkeeper reason to believe that he intended to dawdle and shirk at these duties to the greatest extent possible, enjoying the opportunity to live well on his employer's stipend for a few tendays. The accommodations were far, far better than the tinsmith's apartment, if somewhat pricier than Jack might like. He immediately put the place to the test by crawling back into bed and sleeping away most of the day, counting it as a reasonable reward for his recent labors.

"A more permanent arrangement is, of course, to be preferred," he told himself as he dined at the Ravenstrand's common board that evening, "but for a tenday or so, this will serve well enough." He examined a couple of the daily handbills from the inn's common room while he ate. The Lord Mayor's Revel was of course the chief topic of the day; Jack read about the lavish preparations and delightful entertainment planned for the evening. Seila would be there, perhaps expecting him to show up to unmask Fetterfist if word had not yet spread that Balathorp had been turned in to the city watch with serious accusations leveled against him. The thought of crashing the affair to see her crossed his mind, but then he reminded himself that he was trying to stay out of sight until the obnoxious Tarandor Delhame returned to Iriaebor.

The thought of Seila merely increased Jack's frustration at the notion of outwaiting the master abjurer. With the remains of Norwood's reward, the Sarkonagael's reward, the hefty fee he'd extorted from the wizard Tarandor, and the full purse he'd found among Balathorp's effects, Jack was as wealthy as anyone in Raven's Bluff who wasn't a noble or a very successful merchant. In fact, he was rich as he'd ever been in his life, a state of affairs he very much looked forward to enjoying. But that was nowhere as rich as he might be if he could win the hand of Seila Norwood. In fact, as Jack reflected on events, it occurred to him that of the various schemes and designs he'd concocted since his escape from the rothé pastures of Tower Chûmavhraele, the one effort now in the greatest doubt was attaching himself in a real and lasting way to the Norwood fortunes. More to the point, he *missed* Seila, and found that his thoughts lingered on her merry smile, her enchanting green eyes, her lively wit, the delightful curves, the sweet sensation of her lips meeting his … he gave a small sigh, and shook his head.

"Clearly, it's well past time to find my way back into her favor," he reflected. "The question is, how?" He could invent a story that accounted for why he went to such pains to claim a title—an old curse or enemy he was desperate to avoid, perhaps. The difficulty was that both Seila and her father were now predisposed to doubt any new explanations he offered. If that were the case, would an honest and sincere apology stand the best chance of success? Both sincerity and honesty were somewhat foreign to Jack's nature, but Seila seemed to have a way of bringing out strange sentiments in him. Perhaps he ought to hire a coach and go out to the Lord Mayor's palace this very moment and tell her exactly what he felt in his heart … but, of course, he was supposed to be staying out of sight until Tarandor departed. The whole simulacrum scheme would collapse if word somehow got back to Tarandor that Jack was still at liberty.

Jack scowled to himself; he disliked waiting. Deciding he was in need of more convivial company than that offered by the Ravenstrand, he returned to his room for a cloak and rakish hat, then set out for the Smoke Wyrm. It was only a few blocks away,

but he took a circuitous route to throw off any hypothetical tails. The evening was overcast, with a three-quarter moon that peeked infrequently through the scudding clouds. The rains and cold weather of the last few days seemed to finally be moving on, but the streets still seemed unusually empty, almost as if the city was holding its breath in anticipation.

The glow of lanternlight and murmur of voices from the taphouse were a welcome improvement. Jack found the Smoke Wyrm perhaps half-full, and paused in the doorway to make sure no one he did not care to meet was waiting for him. The place seemed safe enough, so he made his way to the bar. “A good evening to you, friend Tharzon,” he said to the old dwarf, who was working behind the counter. “A pint of your excellent lager, if you please. There will be no Old Smoky for me this evening.”

Tharzon snorted. “I never thought I’d live to see you learn a lesson, Jack.” He drew a pint for Jack and set it in front of the rogue. Then he reached under the counter and brought out a large leather belt pouch. “Speaking of which, you left this here last night.”

Jack looked at the pouch in confusion for a moment before he recognized it as Balathorp’s. He’d taken it from the slaver along with his coinpurse and sword, but hadn’t gotten around to looking through it during last night’s drinking at the Smoke Wyrm. “My thanks,” he said. “I had forgotten all about this.”

Taking the large mug and the leather pouch, he found a small table in a dark corner where he could watch the door without being easily seen. Carefully he emptied the pouch’s contents on the table. There was a well-worn ledger, a charcoal pencil, a pair of manacles, and finally a strange stone of mottled black and green, about half the size of his fist. He sensed magic in the stone, but its purpose eluded him; after scrutinizing it for a few moments, he set it aside. The ledger was filled out with cryptic abbreviations and columns of figures, marking dates and sums of coin. On a hunch Jack flipped to the pages for the last couple of days, and discovered on the page dated 14 Tarsakh the notation *17 Tars. 12b. Mumfort. Mchd: JR, m, hmn, 30. Source:? Dest: Chum. Val: 500? D. wants this one*.

“Twelve bells, night of the seventeenth at Mumfort’s warehouse,” Jack decided. Balathorp had recorded Jack’s anticipated abduction as one more item of business, it seemed. From neighboring entries he quickly discerned that *mchd* meant “merchandise” and that the slaver had noted him as a thiry-year-old male human. Destination clearly suggested Chûmavhraele, and Balathorp seemed to guess his value at five hundred gold crowns, which seemed like a lot to Jack. Then again, the slaver probably hoped that Dresimil Chûmavh would gladly pay to get her hands on the man who’d whisked Seila Norwood out of her clutches. Perhaps the ledger might reveal more of Balathorp’s acquisitions and deliveries—that would seem to be sufficiently incriminating to help the Watch along with its investigation. Jack began to scan the ledger for more information, paging back to see if he could find a record of Seila Norwood’s capture and sale to the dark elves, and lost himself in the tale of brutality, greed, and woe recorded in the slaver’s books. Fetterfist was a very busy fellow, it seemed, and he’d made a fortune out of buying and selling people.

“A good evening to you, Jack.” The rogue looked up; Narm gave him a friendly nod and seated himself at Jack’s table, his large hand wrapped around a mug of Tharzon’s stout. The swordsman had evidently decided that Jack was not so bad a fellow, especially since Jack had paid him quite a good deal of coin in the last tenday or so. “Working on another job already?”

“Satisfying my curiosity,” Jack answered. “These were in the pouch we took off Balathorp last night.”

“No more gold,” Narm observed, with a small frown of disappointment.

“No, but we have Fetterfist’s books here. See, he recorded every, er, acquisition he made or intended to make, then where and when he sold his merchandise.” Jack pointed out the entry referring to himself. “Here is last night’s business. It seems he meant to sell me for five hundred crowns.”

“You should hand that over to the magistrate,” Narm observed. “It seems like damning evidence against Balathorp. Speaking of which, I didn’t see anything in today’s handbills about his arrest.”

Jack shrugged. “The Watch is most likely keeping the affair quiet while they investigate. A man of Balathorp’s station unmasked as a slaver? Shocking! Sensational! The last thing the authorities would want is to have it all come out in the broadsheets and handbills before they are certain of the facts.”

Narm paged through the ledger, looking it over. “What do you make of this one?” he asked. He showed Jack an entry that read: *18 Tars. 10b. Mchd: Lot of 60–80? Source: Blkwd. Dest: Shark. Val: 10 ea.* “It’s for tonight.”

Jack looked at the notations. “A lot of sixty to eighty captives at once? Is that possible? I haven’t heard of any slaver trying something as ambitious as that.” He frowned, wondering what sort of scheme Balathorp had planned, and whether it was still going forward with the slaver lord in the Watch’s custody.

He was interrupted by the strange stone from Balathorp’s pouch, which hummed softly. The thing was glowing with a faint luminescence, almost as if the flecks of emerald in its mottled surface were gleaming of their own accord.

“What in the world?” Narm muttered, staring at the small stone. “What manner of magic is this?”

“I am not sure,” Jack answered. He stared at the dark stone for a long moment, then reached out tentatively to turn it over and see if anything was unusual on its other side.

The instant his fingertips brushed the cool stone, he felt a presence in his mind. *“Fetterfist,”* a cool elven voice seemed to whisper through the stone. Jack recognized Dresimil Chûmavh’s lilting tone, and found a strikingly clear image of the drow noblewoman in his mind’s eye. “*I have sixty warriors in the cellars,*” she continued. *“Make sure your men are ready—we strike at ten bells. And watch Norwood, he brought additional guards.”*

Jack snatched his hand away from the stone, startled. A sending-stone! he realized. He’d heard of such devices before. Somewhere in the Underdark below his feet, Dresimil was holding in her hand a stone that was a twin to the one sitting on the wooden desk in front of Jack. As far as she knew, the stone Jack held in his hand was still in Fetterfist’s possession. Did she expect a reply?

“What? What happened?” Narm demanded.

Jack realized that the swordsman hadn’t heard any of Dresimil’s message. “A message for Balathorp,” he answered, absently rubbing his fingers. “It’s the drow. They have a strong force somewhere, and they intend to attack in cooperation with the slavers. Tonight, at ten bells of the evening.”

“That would explain the ledger entry. Did the drow say anything about their target?”

“Lord Norwood,” Jack replied. His mind raced. Where would Marden Norwood be this evening at ten bells? It would be someplace that Dresimil expected Cailek Balathorp to be, too … A sick dread began to gather in the pit of the stomach as the answer became clear to him. He turned a stricken look on Narm and urgently asked, “What time is it now? What is the hour? Selûne grant that we’re not too late!”

“It struck nine just before I came in, but that was a good quarter-hour ago, perhaps more,” Narm said. “Where will the dark elves strike?”

“The Lord Mayor’s Spring Revel,” Jack answered with a grimace. “Dresimil mentioned Lord Norwood by name, and that is almost certainly where Balathorp would be if we hadn’t lured him out last night.” He looked down at the slaver’s ledger. “The Lord Mayor is a Blacktree, isn’t he? That’s Blackwood Manor there. It must be.” He leaped to his feet, seized the pouch, the stone, and the ledger, and threw his cloak over his shoulder. “Come on, Narm. We have to warn them!”

The half-orc rose to his feet. “Jack, what can we do? Blackwood Manor is a couple of miles outside town. What is the point of racing out there just in time to be murdered or enslaved?”

“You do not understand. *Seila* is there!” Jack hurried over to the counter, ripped a piece of blank paper from the slaver’s journal, and scribbled out a quick message.

Tharzon looked at Jack with a furrowed brow. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“The drow. They’re going to strike at the Lord Mayor’s revel. I have to get out to Blackwood Manor at once.” Jack finished his note

and handed it to the old dwarf. “Find someone to take this to Nimber’s Skewer Shop, and have your man ask for Elana. The quicker, the better.”

Tharzon’s eyes widened. “Are you certain that is wise?” he asked.

“She’s no friend to the dark elves, I can tell you that. And if I am right, we might need all the blades we can find tonight.”

The dwarf stared in surprise a moment longer before nodding his head. “Right, then. Wait one moment and we’ll find a ride for you.” He turned and waved his cane at the barkeeps and workers in the taproom. “Bann! Come here, I’ve got a message for you. Grith, go harness the wagon and horses, we need it now! Orph, go find Kurzen and tell him to fetch his armor and his hammer, he’ll have need of them. Hurry, all of you! There’s not a moment to lose.”

Jack wavered, uncertain whether he’d be better off to go at once or wait on Tharzon’s messengers. He decided he’d need a wagon or carriage or horse in any event, and Tharzon’s was the closest to hand. “You have my thanks, Tharzon,” he said. “Narm, fetch the rest of the Blue Wyverns if you can find them fast. I leave as soon as we can hitch the team.” Then he hurried out to the stable behind the taphouse to lend a hand with the wagon.

The night grew darker and drearier as the brewer’s wagon clattered loudly along the Fire River Road. The overcast was thickening, hiding the moon, and a biting wind from the north drove small, stinging droplets of cold rain against Jack’s face. He clung to the bench with both hands as the wagon bounced and swayed along the rutted road. Beside him, Kurzen gripped the reins and drove the two-horse team onward through the night; in the straw-covered wagon bed Narm, Halamar, and Arlith hung on with all their strength.

“Kurzen, slow down!” Halamar called. “You’ll overturn us!”

“No time!” Jack shouted back. “Drive them harder!”

The dwarf grimaced, but did not bother to reply to either of them; all of his attention was on the road. But he flicked the whip at the

galloping horses and shouted “Yah! Yah!” spurring them on even faster.

Jack spied an iron gate standing open up ahead on the left-hand side of the road. “Blackwood,” he said to Kurzen. “Turn there!”

The dwarf nodded. He let the horses thunder up to the gate and finally slowed them just enough to make the turn. The wagon careened on two wheels, and they very nearly rolled right at the entrance of the manor’s drive, but somehow Kurzen steered the team back the other way just enough to bring all four wheels back to the road. Ahead of them stood a magnificent manor house amid stately old oaks and laspars, festively illuminated by scores of colorful lanterns. Fine carriages filled the drive in front of the manor’s door, with liveried footmen waiting patiently by their master’s coaches. Two guards in the black and silver of House Blacktree flanked the door. “Thank the gods, we’re not too late,” Jack said. But how long did they have?

Kurzen drove the heavy old beer-wagon right up to the foot of the steps, sideswiping a fine coach with a tremendous crash as he reined in the exhausted horses. The instant the wagon slowed, Jack vaulted to the ground, followed by the rest of his companions. The guards at the door shouted in alarm and hurriedly shifted their halberds from their shoulders. “Here now!” one of the guards shouted. “You stop right there!”

“Narm, Kurzen!” Jack called. He simply rolled beneath the lowered halberds and darted past the guards. As they turned to strike, the half-orc swordsman and the burly dwarf tackled them on the steps, pummeling them furiously. Ignoring the spreading commotion behind him, Jack hurried through the great house’s foyer and front hall. Well-dressed lords and ladies turned in surprise as Jack strode toward the palace’s grand ballroom … but more of the Blacktree guards now hurried to intercept Jack. This time Halamar dealt with the armsmen, conjuring a wall of roaring flame to block their path. Gasps of astonishment and cries of panic spread through the crowd at the sight of the magical flames.

“Better speak swiftly,” Halamar said to Jack. “I will not be able to keep the guards out for long without killing some of them, and I

have no wish to spend the rest of my days in the city dungeons."

"My thanks, Halamar!" Jack answered. He clapped the sorcerer on the shoulder and strode through the ballroom's wide doorway; he could feel the heat of the roaring wall of flame at his back. He paused, looking left and right, and then he saw Seila and her parents standing together near the center of the room. Squaring his shoulders, Jack strode purposefully toward Lord Norwood, conscious of the eyes of hundreds on him.

"Jack, what are you doing?" Seila asked in a low voice. She wore a beautiful floor-length green dress. Despite the danger he knew was drawing near, Jack's heart took a tumble at the sight of her. "You should not be here!"

"I know, dear Seila. I will explain myself later, but first I must speak with your father." He turned to Marden Norwood, who regarded him with a look of stony disapproval. "Lord Norwood," he said, "you are all in terrible danger. The drow plan to attack you here in a matter of minutes. Their warriors are below the manor house at this very moment. Every important lord and official in Raven's Bluff is here tonight—Dresimil Chûmavh means to decapitate the city in a single stroke."

Norwood glared at Jack. "Preposterous," he declared. "I have never known you to speak a single word of truth. And the drow would never dare such a brazen attack."

Jack momentarily hesitated. Marden Norwood had good reason to doubt his words, but he hadn't expected to be dismissed out of hand, especially when bringing the old lord a warning about the drow. Seila, however, inadvertently rescued him. "How do you know this, Jack?" she asked.

"I caught Fetterfist," he explained, "and intercepted a message for him from Dresimil Chûmavh. Cailek Balathorp is Fetterfist!"

"Balathorp is Fetterfist?" Norwood repeated. "That is impossible!"

"I turned him over to the Watch last night," Jack said. "Now, I beg you—"

"Just one moment, Norwood." Jack glanced to his right … and there stood Cailek Balathorp, dressed in elegant black garb for the ball. "I cannot let that accusation pass unanswered," said Balathorp.

Jack stood dumbfounded for several heartbeats. Balathorp should have been locked up in a cell in Ravendark Castle, not walking about at his liberty attending social functions! For that matter, even if some friend or ally of his had secured his release, the man ought to still be unconscious. “What are you doing here?” he finally managed. “You should be in the city dungeons!”

“Address me as ‘My Lord,’ or I will have you taught to speak more respectfully to your betters,” Balathorp snapped. “As it turns out, the magistrate does not place much stock in anonymous letters full of baseless allegations; he recognized that something was gravely amiss and summoned a healer to rouse me.” The tall lord then turned to Marden Norwood. “This houseguest of yours waylaid me in the street and drugged me. I have no idea what madness or villainy drove him to treat me in such a fashion, but I will not stand by and allow him to slander my good name in front of all these people. Silence him at once, or you will answer for his words.”

Jack glanced back to Marden Norwood, and saw nothing but cold fury on the old lord’s face. He tried again, desperate to make Seila’s father see the truth of his words. “Lord Norwood, Balathorp is in league with the drow! He has blades of his own here this evening to aid their attack. You must believe me!”

“That is enough,” Norwood snarled. He made a curt gesture with his hand. Jack noticed that while many of the Blacktree house guards were blocked from the ballroom by Halamar’s spell, there were still a dozen or so armsmen of other houses standing discreetly by the curtained alcoves and windows in the ballroom, several of them in the Norwood house colors. The Norwood armsmen began to hurry through the crowd toward Jack.

“I do not like the looks of this, Jack,” Arlith whispered behind him. “Are you certain you’ve got the right villain?”

A short, round-bodied fellow in a gold-embroidered black coat approached Norwood, frowning. Jack recognized the gold oak-leaf emblem of the Blacktree family on his coat, and the large gold chain that served as the mayor’s badge of office. “What’s all this about, Norwood?” the short nobleman asked.

“I apologize for the disturbance, Blacktree,” Norwood said through gritted teeth. “It appears this interruption must be dealt with. Please have him arrested.”

Jack glanced around and saw nothing but anger, suspicion, and contempt on the faces of the city’s assembled elites. He had only moments before Norwood’s soldiers dragged him away. Well, some of the lords and ladies in the room would get exactly what they deserved if the dark elves murdered them all after they ignored his warning. Others, most notably Seila, were innocent and were likely to be hurt or killed if he could not prove his point.

The great mantle clock in the adjoining room struck the hour; the first bell rang clearly throughout the hushed crowd. In pure desperation, Jack murmured the words to his invisibility spell and vanished from view.

The crowd gasped and stirred in shock. Cries of “The villain is escaping!” or “Stop him!” rang through the room. Jack, however, did not flee. He reached into the pouch at his belt and drew forth Fetterfist’s leather half-hood. Then he stole up behind Balathorp, unsheathing his dagger. The second bell struck. With the quickness of a striking snake, he pulled the half-mask down over Balathorp’s head while immobilizing the tall slaver with the threat of a bared blade at his throat. The sudden motion spoiled Jack’s invisibility, as he expected; he wavered back into view.

“Stand down your guards or Balathorp dies!” Jack shouted. The third bell chimed. “Seila—look at this man’s face. Is this Fetterfist?”

“I’ll have you fed to the eels for this!” Balathorp hissed to Jack. He twisted in Jack’s grip until Jack pinked him with the point of the dagger.

“That is one outcome,” Jack agreed. Another bell rang. “On the other hand, if I am a villain or madman, as you claim, there is no reason why I shouldn’t slit your throat if I am doomed anyway. Now hold still, or I’ll see if Seila can identify your corpse.”

Jack saw the bodyguards, armsmen, and retainers who were converging on the ballroom watching him with alert, determined expressions; well, if he’d done nothing else, he had at least put them on their guard. Norwood stepped forward and addressed Jack. “Stop

this at once!" he barked. The fifth bell sounded. "I have no idea what game you are playing at, but your villainy is at an end!"

Seila, on the other hand, stood staring at Jack and Balathorp with a sick expression on her face. "Seila, it would be helpful if you could resolve this question soon," Jack prompted her. "Is this the man who ambushed the Norwood caravan and sold you into captivity in Chûmavhraele?"

Seila shifted her eyes from Jack's face to Balathorp's. The sixth bell struck … and a flicker of shock, then anger, crossed her features. "Yes, it is," she said, almost as if she were surprised to hear herself speak. Then, more loudly, "Yes! He is Fetterfist. I will not forget that hood and face as long as I live. Father, Jack is right!"

Norwood turned to Seila and started to say something, but his words died in his throat as he took the measure of her expression. He looked back to Balathorp, and his eyes narrowed. The seventh bell of the hour sounded. "Incredible," he said to the tall lord. "You dared to abduct my daughter? You murdered my retainers?"

"It is a lie! This man—" Balathorp shouted, but Jack silenced him with a little more pressure of his dagger. The clock struck its eighth bell.

Jack looked past the slaver's shoulder at Seila's father and Lord Blacktree, still standing next to each other. "My lords, there will be time later to demand explanations. Dresimil Chûmavh is here, and she means to take or kill you all."

"What do you say?" said Blacktree. The ninth bell sounded. "The drow will attack us here?"

"Along with any thugs or sellswords Balathorp here could arrange," Jack replied. He swept the ballroom and its balconies with his eyes, looking for cloaked and hooded figures in the shadows.

"Perhaps it would be wise to—" the Lord Mayor started to say, but at that moment the tenth bell of the hour struck. On the very note, globes of pure blackness suddenly sprang into being throughout the grand ballroom, followed at once by screams of panic and the sudden shrill sound of steel. Jack caught one glimpse

of slender figures in dark cloaks appearing in the doorways and alcoves of the room before darkness suddenly swallowed him where he stood. The scuffle and trample of panicked footsteps seemed to be all around him; he tightened his grasp on Balathorp. But at that moment a large, strong hand clamped onto his right wrist, challenging him for control of the dagger—Balathorp had used the cover of the darkness to make a grab for the weapon.

Jack struggled to drive the blade home and managed to give the tall slaver a nasty cut, but a hard-driven elbow knocked him back. Balathorp grunted and twisted out of Jack's grip. "Too late, Ravenwild," the slaver hissed from somewhere nearby. "We have prepared a long time for this day. When we are done here, I will be the only lord left in Raven's Bluff."

"By all means, keep talking," Jack replied, groping in the darkness. "I find this fascinating." Someone blundered into him, and Jack very nearly stabbed him or her before he recognized the soft curve of a woman's shoulder under his fingers. The woman gave a shriek of fright and recoiled; Jack muttered an oath and sheathed his dagger. He stopped moving and held still, listening for his foe, but it was hopeless. The ballroom was panic and bedlam, with screams of pain, cries of panic and dismay, the crash and clatter of furniture and glass, and countless footsteps and boot-scufflings in the dark. He heard Marden Norwood shouting commands, Lord Mayor Blacktree shouting out orders of his own, and half dozen other lords and captains all trying to assert control over the room.

"Chaos and calamity," Jack said to himself. "This is madness!" If he moved he might blunder into someone else's raised blade. If he stayed put some clever dark elf might cut him down like a stupid sheep. Jack stood paralyzed, unsure whether to wait for the darkness to end, try to find his way out, or announce his presence by calling out. But then a single terrified scream ended his indecision—Seila's cry, ringing from somewhere not far off.

"Help! Jack!" she cried. Her cry was suddenly muffled, as if by a hand or gag clamped over her mouth.

"Seila," Jack breathed. Without another thought, he rushed in the direction of her voice, only to stumble at once over a body lying

motionless on the floor. He picked himself up and proceeded more carefully—and then he felt a strong counter spell wash across the ballroom. The drow darkness-globes evaporated one after another, dispelled by some spellcaster in the room. The return of the ballroom's lanternlight revealed a scene of absolute pandemonium: Dozens appeared to be dead or wounded already, and drow warriors moved through the crowd, cutting down some and shooting others with their drugged quarrels. The guards of half a dozen noble houses battled fiercely against quick, graceful drow swordsmen, while others fought against a large gang of brown-hooded ruffians—Fetterfist's men, or so Jack guessed—who were pouring into the manor's foyer and front hall, blocking escape.

At first the whole scene appeared to be an unmitigated disaster, and Jack's heart sank. But then he noticed that things were not all in the villains' favor. Many of the nobles and city officials were armed with rapiers, daggers, and other such weapons suitable in a social setting, and they appeared to know how to use them. Others were spellcasters, and they plied wand and spell against the manor's attackers. Norwood stood in the middle of a knot of his own armsmen, his wife Idril by his side shouting "Seila! Seila!" and looking desperately around the room. Jack spied Narm and Kurzen battling furiously against the ruffians near the ballroom entrance, while Halamar defended himself with five darting daggers of flame that wheeled and tumbled through the air around him.

"The issue is in doubt," the rogue said to himself as he turned one way and another, searching for some glimpse of Balathorp or Seila. After a moment he spotted the tall lord's yellow hair near the main entrance. Balathorp was shoving his way toward the brown-hooded sellswords blocking the door … and he was dragging Seila along behind him. Jack ran after him, dodging and twisting his way through the press of panicked party-goers and brawling guards.

A pair of drow warriors appeared in front of him, and Jack found two rapiers hedging him in. Behind them stood one of Dresimil's brothers—most likely Jaeren, because he was the one with the sense of humor and the sorcerer confronting Jack had a wide and insincere grin on his ebony features. "Well, well," said the drow

prince. “If it isn’t the Lord Jaer Kell Wildhame! We have been looking for you, sir. You departed without taking your leave of my sister; she was very disappointed.”

“I have always heard that it is unwise to overstay one’s welcome,” Jack replied. He drew his own rapier, although he did not fancy his odds against two skilled drow warriors at once, especially if Jaeren employed his magic. He lost sight of Balathorp, but then glimpsed the tall, thin lord once again, now fighting with his gang of ruffians at his back. “You might be well advised to consider that old adage, Lord Jaeren. Your troops are outnumbered and you no longer possess the advantage of surprise.”

“Do not fear, Lord Wildhame. We shall withdraw when we are good and ready,” the sorcerer promised. “In the meantime, my sister has specifically instructed me to extend you the hospitality of Chûmavhraele, and your friend Seila Norwood as well.” He glanced at Jack’s blade, and raised an eyebrow. “If you please?”

“I fail to see what possible use your sister has for us. I was an indifferent field hand, after all.” Jack stood his ground, trying to project confidence he did not feel. “Was Seila Norwood a better scullery maid than I thought?”

There was a sudden surge in the fighting near the door. Jaeren glanced over, as did Jack. A new band of fighters entered the fray, crashing into the rear ranks of Balathorp’s slavers. They were a motley band of ruffians and sellswords, not much different from the slavers they attacked, but instead of brown hoods, these wore surcoats or jackets with a flash of white cloth over the breast—the image of a crescent moon crossed with a dagger. Jack caught a glimpse of the tattooed swordsman who’d fought for Myrkysa Jelan in Sarbreen, and an instant later, he saw Jelan herself, dressed in her armor of black mail and wielding her katana with precise savagery. Jack grinned and raised a fist. “Huzzah!” he shouted. “Your timing is impeccable, Elana!”

Jaeren’s good humor vanished. He spared one more glance for Jack, and gestured to the two warriors with him. “Take him alive,” he said. “I must deal with this.” Then he leaped into the air, hurling bolts of black ice at the mercenaries accompanying Jelan.

The two warriors facing Jack struck as one; the rogue barely parried the first blade, and twisted awkwardly away from the other. The dark elves tried again, and this time Jack took a shallow cut along his ribs. The drow grinned and circled him, flashing finger signs at each other, and then they attacked again. The first warrior pressed Jack closely, and their blades flashed and rang in the middle of the chaotic ballroom. But the second warrior stepped back, drawing his hand-crossbow and loading it with a poisoned quarrel. He took deliberate aim at Jack while Jack was fully engaged by his comrade … but before he could shoot, Arlith slipped up behind him and stabbed him with her dagger. The drow cried out and twisted, firing his quarrel randomly into the fray before sinking to the ground. The warrior dueling Jack glanced back at his comrade for just an instant, but it was long enough for Jack to circle his rapier under his foe's blade and skewer him. "What a scene," the halfling said to Jack. "Things aren't often boring around you, are they?"

"Not often," Jack agreed. He started after Balathorp again, only to realize that the slaver was no longer where he thought. Jelan's mercenaries had turned the tide of the fighting by the entrance, and the assembled nobles with their armsmen had blunted the drow assault. Battle spells thundered and crashed across the manor as Jaeren and other drow spellcasters traded blasts of ice and seething acid with Halamar and other wizards among the assembled lords. The dark elves were giving ground everywhere Jack looked. He finally caught sight of the slaver again, this time standing among the drow who were retreating toward a large alcove where a stage had been set up for the evening's entertainment.

Jaeren abandoned his duel with Halamar and abruptly flew back to the stage where the dark elves gathered. The sorcerer reached into his robes and pulled out a rod or scepter of silver, shouting the words to a spell. A swirling, dark portal formed in the wall … and the drow once again used their darkness spells, blotting half the ballroom in magical darkness. The clash of arms ebbed, although many of Balathorp's brown-hooded ruffians were still on their feet. This time Jack watched Halamar and Jelan's elven wizard Kilarnan

hurriedly cast counter spells to remove the inky barrier, wiping away the unnatural blackness shadowing the area by the stage.

The drow were gone … and so, too, were Balathorp and Seila.

"No," Jack groaned. He surged toward the black, rotating disk of magic that hovered before the far wall, along with half the remaining nobles and armsmen in the room. Marden Norwood stood close by him, his face ashen, his guards in a tight knot around him. But Jack merely stared at the portal. Seila was in the hands of the drow again, and the gods alone knew what sort of tortures they would invent to punish her for her previous escape.

Myrkyssa Jelan strolled up beside Jack, cleaning the blood from her katana. "A useful trick," she said, glancing at the portal. Then she looked back to Jack. "I came as you asked. Do you have what you promised me?"

Jack reached into his inner pocket and withdrew the pages he'd cut out of the Sarkonagael. Jelan smiled and extended her hand—but Jack folded the pages from top to bottom, and deliberately tore them in half. He handed the top halves to Jelan, who stared at him in amazement and growing anger. "This is the one spell in that book that you were concerned about," he told her. "You didn't trust Norwood with this spell, but I remember what you did with it when it was in your hands. Keep this half, and you will be assured that no one will create a shadow simulacrum without your consent."

"That is not what you promised me in your message," Jelan said, her eyes flashing.

"Read my note again, my dear Elana. I promised you that Norwood would not have it, and I lived up to my word. I have learned better than to make you a promise I do not intend to keep."

Their conversation attracted Marden Norwood's attention. The lord looked at Jack and Jelan, and his eyes narrowed as he saw the dark parchment with its silver lettering in Jack's hands. "What do you have there?" he demanded.

"The spell of umbral simulacra from the Sarkonagael," Jack replied. "I doubt that you will forgive me for this, but I do not trust anyone with the entire spell. However, if you wish to assure yourself that no one will employ this magic against you, you need

only keep this somewhere safe." He handed the remaining fragments to the old lord.

"You are the one who recovered the Sarkonagael?" Norwood asked in amazement. "You had the gall to extort two thousand more crowns from me, and then you give me an incomplete book?"

"Did you want the book to make use of its powers or to make sure no one else did?" Jack asked. "I would like to think it was for the better reason, but if not, then yes, I cheated you. If we meet again, I will make good on any restitution you require of me."

"If we—" Marden Norwood glowered at Jack. "Where do you think you are going?"

"Chûmavhraele, of course. Seila is there, and she needs my help."

Jelan glanced at the portal in surprise. "Jack, don't! If the dark elves left it open, it is almost certainly a trap."

"I agree," he replied, "which is why I would not recommend following. Elana, you may distrust Norwood here, but he has fought the dark elves and their friends on the Council for years. Lord Norwood, Elana here knows other ways to Chûmavhraele, and she is no friend of the dark elves. Persuade her to guide you, and bring all the soldiers you can—I am counting on you to storm Dresimil's castle. The two of you together can defeat the drow."

Both Jelan and Norwood began to protest, but Jack ignored them. He took two quick steps and hurled himself headlong into the magic darkness.

The drow were waiting on the other side.

Jack awoke in darkness. His head was pounding as if he'd downed ten flagons of cheap wine, and he felt shaky and weak. With a small groan, he opened his eyes to a dishearteningly familiar gloom. He was in the Underdark again; the dim echoes of faerie-fire that illuminated his surroundings did nothing to dispel the cool dampness in the air or the absolute blackness brooding in the shadows. For a long moment he wondered how he had come to be in the cavern-world again, until the throbbing in his hip, chest, and shoulder reminded him that he'd been shot by small, poisoned

crossbow bolts. He remembered stepping through the portal into an open place below the walls of the castle, the sudden snap of crossbows and the whirring flight of their bolts …

"Damn the drow, and all their mischief," he groaned, sitting up and holding his head in his hands. At least they'd taken the trouble to dress the small bolt punctures. He seemed to be in a tiny, windowless cell, with nothing more than a simple pallet and a chamber pot for his convenience; one wall of the cell was made of iron bars, through which he could see cells like his own, along with a dark, smooth vault of stone blocks. There was a guardroom down the hallway to his right, from which faint purple-tinted wizard light glowed. "My accommodations have improved," he muttered. "It seems this time I will be staying in the tower instead of the pastures."

He heard a faint rustle from the cell to his left, and a soft voice called out. "Who's there?"

"Seila?" Jack jumped to his feet—too swiftly, because his head reeled and his knees felt weak—and staggered to the front of his cell, trying to look down the row of cells.

"Yes, it's me. Is that you, Jack?"

"I am afraid so. I see that I pursued you all too well." He allowed himself a small smile in the darkness. The first part of his plan had worked out, at any rate. Well, perhaps not entirely as he would have liked, because he'd had some idea of slipping out of sight after passing through the portal and slinking about stealthily without being imprisoned, too. "How long have I been here?"

"I have no way to mark time, but I would guess I heard the dark elves drag you into your cell eight or ten hours ago. I had no idea who they were locking up, though."

That long? he wondered, before reminding himself that he was in no particular hurry to meet whatever fate was in store for him. Besides, time was on his side—it would take Norwood and Myrkyssa Jelan hours to assemble a company strong enough to attack the drow castle and lead them down to the Underdark through Sarbreen or the cavern tunnels the slavers used. "Am I

correct in assuming that we are now prisoners in Tower Chûmavhraele?"

He could almost picture Seila nodding in agreement in the cell next to his. "Yes, but I have never been in this part of the castle."

"I am afraid this is the sort of dungeon reserved for the truly incorrigible captives. A nice young lady such as yourself would normally have nothing to do with a place like this." Jack looked back down the hallway to his right, and frowned in surprise—there was a large silver ring on his right ring-finger. It was shaped like a serpent grasping its tail in its teeth. "Now that is odd. The drow put a ring on my finger."

"A ring? Whatever for?"

"I have no idea." He immediately tried to remove it, only to discover that it was impossible to move even a fraction of an inch—which was quite curious, because the ring did not otherwise seem unusually tight or fixed to his flesh. "Hmm. I suspect that I will not like what I hear when its purpose is explained, but I cannot remove it."

The effort to pull off the ring left his temples throbbing, and he leaned back against the wall to rest his head. Giving up for the moment, he considered their predicament. Was Dresimil simply intent on exacting some measure of revenge for their escape of a couple of months past? What form would that take? A return to toil and drudgery? A swift execution? Or—he shuddered at this thought—a more drawn-out and creative one? The drow were nothing if not a cruel and artful people, and no doubt they'd forgotten more interesting ways of putting someone to death than torturers in surface lands had come up with in a thousand years. Time, he reminded himself—the longer Dresimil dithered over just what to do with them, the more likely it was that help could reach them. Then again, if a threat materialized, the drow might decide to hurry things along.

Seila was silent for a long moment. "If it is any consolation, Father probably believes your story about Maldridge now."

Jack laughed softly in spite of himself. "I can think of better ways to be proven right. Speaking of which, I have reason to hope that

help is on the way. Do not despair."

He started to say more, but then he heard light footfalls in the hall outside his cell. A drow sergeant—a woman, tall and broad-shouldered for a dark elf—appeared in front of his cell. Jack thought it was Sinafae, one of two who had escorted him to the rothé fields when he first arrived in Chûmavhraele. The sergeant studied him through the bars with a cruel smile on her face. "I see that you are awake," the warrior said. "Good. Lady Dresimil has asked for you; best not to keep her waiting." She walked away, calling to other drow nearby in their soft language.

"If you have any more tricks up your sleeve, Jack, now would be the time to put them to use," Seila whispered.

The rogue thought quickly. He could already hear more dark elves returning. If they'd only given him a little more time to gain his bearings, he might have had a chance to concoct some sort of ruse or find an appropriate use for his magic … but of course the drow knew their own sleep poison quite well, and likely had a very good idea of just how long its effects would last. With no better plan in mind, he started to work the spell of shadow-jumping he'd learned from the Sarkonagael, figuring that if he slipped out of his cell then more possibilities might make themselves evident—but as he started to murmur the words of his magic, a shooting, burning pain raced up his right arm from the ring to his shoulder. He broke off his spell in mid-word with a sharp cry of pain, cradling his right hand in his left and swearing colorfully.

"Jack, what's wrong?" Seila hissed.

Before he could answer her, Sinafae and several more guards returned to Jack's cell. The sergeant looked at Jack holding his aching hand and laughed coldly. "Ah, you tried to work some magic, did you? Well, as you have now discovered, the ring of negation you are wearing will permit no such thing. We remember your talents all too well, Wildhame. Go ahead, try another spell or two, and see if it goes any better."

Jack stifled a retort about what Sinafae might try and glared at the dark elf. The diabolical part about the ring was that if a spellcaster wearing it became truly desperate and decided to

sacrifice a finger to regain his magic, the maiming might be enough to ruin any hope of casting a spell requiring complicated gestures—which, naturally, many spells did. Very well, then; if he could not magic his way out of this predicament, he would have to fall back on his native quickness, agility, wits, and daring. “The dark elves do not have a chance,” he promised himself.

Sinafae motioned to her warriors, then produced the keys to the cells. Jack offered no resistance as two drow jerked him to his feet, bound his hands, and pushed him out into the hallway. Another pair of soldiers brought Seila out of her cell, and then they were marched off together through the echoing corridors of the drow castle. After climbing a staircase of gleaming dark marble and passing through several antechambers, the two captives were brought into a magnificent throne-hall, its walls draped in arrases of scarlet and purple. A dozen dark elf guards stood watch here, but Jack paid them no mind—the Marquise Dresimil Chûmavh watched him languidly from her spider-shaped throne, one of her twin brothers standing just a step below her.

The drow noblewoman was every bit as beautiful as Jack remembered, attired in a snugly fitting gown of emerald green that seemed to almost glow against her perfect ebony skin. Jack stared at her in a curious mixture of admiration and horror, until one of the dark elf guards at his side growled, “On your knees!” Seila sank down with a defiant glare, but Jack took too long abasing himself; the guard kicked his feet out from under him, then reached down to grab him by the collar and yank him to a half-upright pose.

In that undignified position, Jack looked up and saw Dresimil gazing down at him and Seila with cold amusement dancing in her eyes. “Welcome, Jack,” she said. “We missed you in Chûmavhraele, especially after your very memorable leave-taking from our fields. As you might imagine, we have been very anxious to offer our hospitality again.”

Jack winced in pain, but rallied as best he could. “I disliked the prospects for advancement in my position, and decided to seek other employment,” he replied.

“And here we have Seila Norwood as well, daughter of Lord Marden himself,” Dresimil continued. “Such a pretty girl. I see why you fancied her enough to pluck her out of our grasp, Jack. But I must say that was not well thought out—she was not yours to take. She was bought and paid for by House Chûmavh. We do not like to be parted from our property, you know.”

Jack bit back his angry reply. These dark elves were so thrice-cursed *unreasonable!* He could not imagine the combination of pride, cruelty, and avarice one needed to steal back slaves whose chief offense was successfully escaping. “Your property may think otherwise,” he replied.

Seila was not quite so circumspect in her response. She glared at the drow noblewoman. “I am no one’s property,” she snarled. “You have no right to take me captive, and if you do, you must expect that I will bend every effort to regaining my freedom. What wrong did I ever do to you? You have hundreds of slaves already. What possible reason could you have for kidnapping me again? Or Jack, for that matter? Is this all for *spite*?”

“You would do well to remember whom you address, slave,” Sinafae hissed in reply. She stepped forward and struck Seila a back-handed slap that knocked the young noblewoman to the ground. Without even thinking about what he was doing, Jack surged to his feet in anger—only to find two bared blades at his neck an instant later.

Dresimil regarded Seila in silence for a moment, with a small cold smile fixed on her perfect features and a gleam of wicked delight in her eye. She rose gracefully and descended from her seat on the dais, motioning for the guards to raise Seila to her feet. “You do not understand us very well, my dear child,” she purred. “Spite is all the reason we need. Although what you term spite I might call a redress of injury—Jack left behind a good deal of damage and brought about a number of deaths when he made his escape, and as I noted before, my house paid good gold to purchase you from Fetterfist. There is a sound purpose in making certain that no one ever deals us a blow without earning retribution threefold at our hands. Your recapture serves as a highly useful lesson to all my slaves that

escape is pointless; we will go to any lengths to take back what is ours."

Seila slumped in despair. Jack swallowed carefully, conscious of the blades at his neck—a rather ironic predicament, considering how he had treated Cailek Balathorp earlier in the evening. "What do you intend to do with us?" he asked Dresimil.

The drow noblewoman studied Jack and Seila for a long time, her smile growing wide and cruel. "As it turns out, I have little further need of Seila Norwood," she said. "She was useful for ensuring that her father made no attempt to drive me from my castle. But now my brothers inform me that the repairs to our old mythal stone are complete; our defensive enchantments will soon ring us in walls of magic that Norwood and all the rest of the foolish lords of Raven's Bluff will be completely unable to assail. In any event, it seems that dear Fetterfist is smitten with Seila's charms in his own way, and he has asked for her. I am inclined to indulge him." Seila drew a deep breath and looked down at the floor, her shoulders quivering as she stifled a sob.

Dresimil laughed softly at the girl's distress, and turned her attention to Jack. "As for you, my Lord Wildhame … I believe that we can take some steps to better fit you for your duties in the rothé fields. Although I shall miss our interesting conversations, I believe we will begin by removing your tongue. We will leave you enough of your fingers to grasp a shovel. And I think we will secure you to a chain and stake, so that you do not wander from your assigned place. You have much toil to repay before we consider your release, however that might come to pass. You are an inventive fellow; perhaps you will think of something … entertaining."

Despite his effort to remain uncowed, Jack's mouth went dry as dust and his knees almost failed him. He tried to speak and found himself unable to say anything at all—not a plea for mercy, a barbed insult, or a witty rejoinder came to mind. Seila looked up at him in horror as Dresimil finished her sentence.

"Lord Wildhame seems overcome," Jaeren remarked. "A pity. I'd hoped for some small jest or perhaps a trenchant observation at this point. Ah, well."

He motioned to the guards accompanying Jack, who moved to secure his arms and drag him off … but at that moment a drow soldier hurried into the throne room and approached Dresimil. The fellow bowed to the noblewoman and spoke swiftly in the liquid tongue of the drow. Dresimil's eyes narrowed, and she straightened in her seat, responding with a sharp question or comment, which the messenger replied to at length. She then dismissed him with a wave of her hand and spoke softly with her brothers. Jack could only make out a few snippets of the conversation—"humans," "warriors," and perhaps "tunnels" or "caverns"—but the guards who had been about to drag him away halted and waited on their mistress.

Somehow Jack found the courage to speak. "Unexpected news, my lady?" he asked.

Dresimil glanced back to him, and her smile this time was without any humor at all. "It seems that our little foray against Blackwood Manor has provoked a reprisal. We anticipated this possibility, of course, and prepared a suitable reception. The mythal is my web, and Lord Norwood is ready to play the fly to my spider. We all know how that turns out, do we not?" She motioned to the guards holding Jack and Seila. "Take them back to their cells until we are ready to continue, and watch them carefully. If Wildhame offers you any trouble, torment the girl and make sure that he can hear her every cry."

"Yes, my lady," the guards answered. They seized Jack by the arms and spun him around, then marched him back down to the dungeon again, with Seila just a few steps behind.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jack passed the next hour pacing restlessly in his cell. This time he was held several doors down from Seila, unable to see her or speak with her. From time to time he tugged at the ring of negation, hoping to find it no longer fixed on his finger, but the thing refused to budge. That was unfortunate, to say the least; he had not counted on being unable to work magic at all. In fact, he might have thought twice about walking nonchalantly into the arms of the dark elves if he'd known his magic could so easily be neutralized. "Somehow I must find a reason to convince the dark elves to remove the ring," he decided. "My prospects would be much more promising without it."

His reflections were interrupted by the rattle and clatter of the dungeon door opening and the footfalls of his jailors. Jack moved closer to the bars to peer down the corridor, wondering if the dark elves were bringing a brazier of coals and a sharp knife to begin the work Dresimil had promised for him … but instead the slaver Cailek Balathorp strode into the dungeon. The tall, straw-haired lord had changed into the black leathers he favored in his guise as Fetterfist, and wore proudly the half-hood Jack had taken from him. He paused by Jack's cell and regarded Jack with a very unpleasant smile on his face. "Now this is gratifying," the slaver remarked. "I have quite a score to settle with you, Ravenwild. I doubt the dark elves will leave me much to work with, but never fear—if you are worried that I will be shortchanged, well, I have some very special arrangements in mind for Seila Norwood."

Jack glared at the renegade lord. He started to compose the darkest and most dreadful threat he could think of, but stopped himself; there was little point in making any promises of vengeance in his current situation. Instead he decided to appeal to the man's greed. "Ransom Seila back to her father," he said. "She's worth far more to you whole and unhurt. Norwood will pay a fortune for her return."

“I expect that he will, and I may do as you suggest … after I have a little sport first.” The slaver grinned and started to turn away.

“Wait!” A sudden notion struck Jack, and he stretched his arm through the bars of his cell. “Listen, Balathorp, I know that I am finished. You’ll have your revenge upon me, and more; the drow will see to that. But if you agree to see Seila Norwood to freedom, I will give you all that remains to me—this enchanted silver ring.” He held up the ring of negation.

The slaver snorted. “I will do as I please with Seila anyway, Ravenwild. That little bauble makes no difference to me.”

Jack reached through the bars, extending the ring. “Take it from my hand,” he begged. “I throw myself on your mercy.”

Balathorp hesitated, and for a moment Jack’s hopes soared … but at that moment a contingent of drow guards appeared. The slaver stepped back, inclining his head to the dark elves; the drow warriors marched past Jack’s cell to where Seila was held. “I am sure the Lady Dresimil will think of a fitting end for you,” he said to Jack. “Console yourself with the thought that I will take good care of Seila Norwood. Farewell, Ravenwild.”

Jack searched for some clever riposte, some appeal that might reach the man, but nothing came to mind. Balathorp turned and followed the dark elves down the corridor to Seila’s cell. Jack heard the rattle of keys in the iron lock, the jingle of chains, Seila’s voice raised in protest … and then Balathorp and the drow jailors returned back along the corridor, ushering Seila along with her arms bound behind her back. She struggled, to no avail, and had time to cry out, “Jack!” as she was swept past him. Jack reached out after her, his fingertips brushing her dress, and then she was gone.

He caught one more brief glimpse of her in the guardroom at the entrance to the row of cells; Balathorp handed her to a pair of hobgoblin slavers. “Take her to the caravan and lock her up with the rest of the merchandise,” he told the fierce creatures. They responded in Goblin, asking some question or another; the slaver shook his head and said, “No, the east tunnel, it looks like we won’t be able to slip out to the north.” Then the dark elves shut the

dungeon door, and Jack could hear or see nothing more except the empty cells around his own.

He gave the bars of his cell an angry shake; they did not move much at all. Then he commenced pacing and worrying at the numerous things that seemed to be out of his control at the moment. He'd succeeded in finding Seila, only to watch her carried away again by the vile Cailek Balathorp while he was very much powerless to prevent it. "Perhaps I should have come up with some more cautious plan than leaping through the portal after Seila," he muttered. He'd assumed that with his magic and native cleverness it would not be difficult to escape the dark elves if they captured him, but now he was much less confident of that. And every moment he remained trapped in this cold, cheerless cell, Balathorp was dragging Seila farther away from him!

He sighed and stretched himself out on a cold stone ledge that served as a bed. Where would Balathorp take Seila? He was certainly through in Raven's Bluff after Jack had exposed him in front of everybody at the Lord Mayor's Revel, and Balathorp's part in the attack had cemented his place as an enemy of the city. It seemed that Balathorp intended to quit Chûmavhraele at his earliest convenience, so presumably the tunnel or tunnels to the east led to the surface. And were Jelan and Norwood still fighting their way down to the drow realm, or had Dresimil already sprung her trap? Did Raven's Bluff even have sufficient forces to defeat the dark elves if they had control over the wild mythal? Jack glanced toward the left-hand wall of his cell and realized that he was looking in the direction of the mythal stone on the lakeshore a mile distant. He could feel the magic of the device through the castle walls, much as one could feel the direction and strength of the sun even with eyes closed. It was much stronger, more focused, than it had been the last time he was in Chûmavhraele.

Jack frowned as he considered the subtle tug and play of unseen forces around him. "What are Jaeren and Jezzryd up to?" he wondered. He felt a certain protective impulse toward the wild mythal; after all, he was fairly certain the goddess Mystra had once asked him to look after it, although it was possible that was only a

dream. It was a strange fate that had bound up his magic with the work of drow archmages ten thousand years before his birth, he reflected. The mythal's touch had rested on him long before he'd been encysted within it for a century; he knew now that it was the source of his magic. He likely wouldn't have been a sorcerer at all if he had been born in some less magical city.

He was roused from his reflections by a sudden clamor of battle not far from his cell. Steel rang against steel just outside the dungeon in which he was imprisoned, followed by the thundering detonations of powerful battle-magic. Even within his cell he could feel the wash of heat and smell the acrid brimstone of flames washing through the chambers outside. Drow shouted to one another, rallying to meet the threat. "Norwood's armsmen!" he decided, scrambling to his feet. His freedom might be at hand … assuming the soldiers discovered the guardroom. He hurried over to the bars of the cell, peering toward the door leading to the guardroom and waiting for it to open.

There was a clatter of swordplay from the other side of the door and a quick rattle of heavy keys—and then a dark elf warrior threw open the door and rushed over to Jack's cell. The drow glanced up and down the hallway, then raised his crossbow and aimed it at Jack. "You are coming with me," he snarled. "Stand back from the door."

"So much for the notion of rescue," Jack muttered. He stepped back from the cell door under the threat of the dark elf's weapon. It seemed likely that the guard was under orders not to kill him, but he would certainly lose any opportunity of slipping away if he were drugged with sleep-venom again. The dark elf reached for the keys at his belt and took a step toward the cell, but at that moment he heard something behind him and spun to face it—only to catch a thrown dagger in his breast. The dark elf staggered back to the bars, his face gray, and started to raise his crossbow at Jack before collapsing to the floor.

Jack stared at the dead drow in astonishment before he glanced up at the guardroom door. The half-orc swordsman Narm stood there, straightening up from his throw, and beside him stood Myrkyssa

Jelan. “Elana! Narm!” he exclaimed. “This is a welcome turn of events. I feared I was being summoned to my execution.”

“It’s still a possibility,” Narm grunted. “There is a whole castle full of drow around us—the rest of our troops are tied up in the tunnels.” He hurried forward to take the keyring from the fallen guard’s belt and began working at the cell door.

Jelan took a moment to examine the cell, then positioned herself to keep an eye on the doorway behind them. “Hello, Jack,” she said. “Somehow I knew that sooner or later I would see you behind bars. There is a certain ironic satisfaction to this moment.”

“How did you find me?”

“I guessed that you would be held in the castle, and led a small company around the tunnel fighting to see if we could spirit you and Seila away while Dresimil was busy with Norwood’s troops. We found our way in through the kitchens.” Jelan looked at the empty cells, and frowned. “By the way, where is Seila?”

“Balathorp has her. He and his slavers are leaving this place—in fact, they may already be gone.”

“That is unfortunate, because Lord Norwood is very anxious to get her back safe and unharmed.”

“As am I,” Jack replied. He met Jelan’s eyes. “Thank you for coming to our aid.”

Jelan snorted. “I did not do it for you, Jack. It seems Dresimil Chûmavh has realized the very scheme I had in mind when I attempted to seize the mythal in the Year of Wild Magic. Since I have some aspirations of my own, I find myself unwilling to stand aside and let her plans proceed. Besides, you and I have some unfinished business.”

“If you are angry about the affair with the Sarkonagael’s spell, I am sure that Norwood is angrier,” he said. “After all, he paid me seven thousand gold crowns for half a spell.”

Narm looked up as he fumbled with the keys. “He paid you how much for that book?” he asked.

“I, ah, presented a request to be compensated for some additional expenses. It is a routine ploy in this sort of negotiation.” Jack grimaced. “I suspect he will want that money returned now.”

The swordsman found the right key, unlocked the cell, and opened the door. “Finally,” he muttered. “Let’s continue the conversation elsewhere. This is not a good place to linger.”

“Agreed,” said Jack. He stepped out and helped himself to the sword and crossbow of the fallen guard. Then he followed Jelan and Narm as they hurried out of the guardroom into the castle’s dimly lit corridors. Five dark elf warriors sprawled dead just outside the door; fighting continued elsewhere in the fortress. The warlord and the swordsman turned left and headed toward the sound of battle until they came to a large, thick-pillared hall at the foot of a wide staircase leading from the dungeon level up into the castle proper. Dozens of orc slave-soldiers and a handful of dark elves sprawled on the floor and the steps.

In the shadows of the large pillars in the hall, several adventurers took cover from drow archers and spellcasters who were themselves out of sight at the top of the stairs. Kurzen, Halamar, and Arlith watched the right-hand side of the stairs. On the other side of the room, several of Jelan’s Moon Daggers—the elf mage Kilarnan, along with the Tempus-priest whom Jack had last seen at the beholder’s hall in Sarbreen, and the tattooed swordsman who had accompanied Jelan on that occasion—guarded the left-hand side of the room.

“I see that you found him,” the priest said to Jelan.

The Warlord nodded. “You may remember Jack Ravenwild from the Temple of the Soulforger. Jack, this is Wulfrad, and the fellow with the tattoos is Monagh. Kilarnan I believe you already know.” Jack bowed to Jelan’s companions, doing his best to ignore the suspicious looks they gave him; they hadn’t exactly parted on very good terms, after all.

“Good to see you, Jack,” Halamar said. The fire-sorcerer gave him a firm arm-clasp. “Was Seila not with you?”

“She was, but Balathorp took her, perhaps an hour ago. I think he is making a run for it.” Jack glanced over to Jelan and her crew. “We need to fight our way out of here. Balathorp is getting away.”

“That was more or less my plan.” Jelan peered through the gloom up the stairs, then nodded at the small band. “This way—”

“One moment,” Jack said. He moved over to Jelan and held up his right hand. “Can you remove this ring for me? It is cursed so that I cannot take it off myself.”

Jelan gave him a skeptical look. “What does it do?”

“It prevents me from using my own magic,” Jack said. The warlord hesitated, so he added, “I have no intention of leaving the Underdark until the drow are dealt with, one way or another. They will hound me to the end of my days otherwise. Besides, I am going nowhere until I find Seila Norwood and see her to safety. I cannot leave her in the dark elves’ hands.”

“You surprise me, Jack. Sentimentality? A sense of responsibility? What next, I wonder?” She took Jack’s right hand in her left, steadying it, and then grasped the ring in her other hand, covering it completely to suppress the ring’s curse with her own native antimagic. With one easy motion she pulled the ring off Jack’s finger, then dropped it into a pouch at her belt. “Hmm, I expected that to be harder,” she said. “Perhaps it was enchanted only so that you could not remove it yourself.”

Jack rubbed his hand with a sigh of relief. “Much better; I thank you. I am ready now.”

Jelan nodded. “Good. Kilarnan, Halamar, will you clear a way for us?”

The two mages looked at each other, then began casting. Jack sensed both of them struggling to gather the power for their spells; all the currents of magic seemed to flow toward the wild mythal, and it required an unusual effort for Halamar and Kilarnan to divert the invisible eddies to their own spell. Halamar launched a huge fireball up the stairs leading to the castle, while Kilarnan followed an instant later with a crackling sphere of lightning. Twin detonations rocked the chamber; screams and shouts echoed down the steps. On the heels of the battle spells, Jelan and her mercenaries darted up the stairs; Jack and his comrades followed. Dead or unconscious dark elves littered the landing above, killed where they’d been standing or crouching to fire down at the adventurers below. The dark elves who survived the powerful spells

were quickly cut down by Jelan, Narm, and the others, or else they fled silently down the castle corridors.

"They'll come back with reinforcements," Kurzen observed.

"Keep moving," Jelan replied. "To the gatehouse!" She turned to the right and headed down a new hallway of blood-red arrases and gleaming black marble. The small party of adventurers fell in around her as they hurried through Tower Chûmavhraele. They took several turns, and passed through a couple of large, empty halls and foyers, until finally they halted by a large double-door reinforced with bands of adamantine. Jelan cracked it open and peeked through; Jack saw the courtyard of the castle just beyond. A squad of drow with a pair of hulking battle-trolls guarded the courtyard and the main gate leading outside.

"Not as many as I expected," Jelan remarked. "Dresimil must have thrown most of her strength against Norwood's soldiers. Well, she'll have cause to regret that soon enough. Kilarnan—the trolls, if you please."

The elf nodded. "Be on your guard. The drow will not be fooled for long." Then he drew his wand and began to whisper the words of an enchantment, his wand rising and falling with the sonorous tones of his voice.

For a moment Jack thought the spell had failed altogether … but then the trolls suddenly straightened up, shaking their heads from side to side with snorts and growls. The drow warriors nearby turned to see what was troubling the big monsters; then one troll let out a bellow of rage and smashed at the nearest drow with its huge spiked hammer, while the other wheeled and rampaged into the middle of the warriors behind it. In the space of an instant the trolls and the drow were locked in a furious melee, as the simple-minded monsters flailed and struck at their masters under Kilarnan's spell.

"Well done," Jelan said to the mage. "The rest of you, follow me when I charge."

"Stupid beasts!" one of the drow warriors cried. "Have you lost your minds?"

"They've been charmed!" another dark elf who must have been the captain of the detachment shouted back. "Stay away from them

until the spell passes!”

The drow warriors scrambled back from the trolls, but not before another one had been hacked down by a huge axe. Jelan watched them scatter, and then she suddenly threw open the tower door and sprinted toward the captain while his back was turned. Narm, Kurzen, the priest Wulfrad, and the tattooed warrior Monagh followed after her; Halamar found a good vantage to throw bolts of fire at the drow as they struggled to meet the new attack. Jack decided to make use of the small crossbow he’d taken from the guard down in the dungeons, staying a few steps back from the heavy fighting. He shot a dark elf who looked like a wizard just before he finished whatever spell he was intoning. Meanwhile, in a few vicious passes of her blade, Myrkyssa Jelan cut down the distracted dark elf captain while the rest of the band and the charmed trolls made short work of the others.

“That seems like a very useful spell,” Jack said to Kilarnan, impressed by how quickly his companions had cut the drow guards to pieces. Perhaps their odds were better than he had thought.

Kilarnan gave him a small nod, then motioned with his wand again and sent the two trolls lumbering off into another castle doorway. “Trolls are weak-willed creatures, easily controlled,” he said. “Still, the enchantment will not last long. Best to send them far away and tell them to forget what they were doing, before they recover and turn on us.”

Jelan headed for the castle’s main gate, and motioned to her companions to draw the foot-thick bolt securing the doors. In a few moments they had the castle gate open. No more drow were close by, but Jack could see dark phalanxes several hundred yards off to his left, near the spot where the cavern of Chûmavhraele ended and the labyrinthine tunnels of the Underdark began. There was heavy fighting near the tunnel mouth; half a dozen brilliant globes of yellow light, carried aloft before ranks of human soldiers, dispelled the gloom like miniature suns. The clangor of steel echoed through the dank air, along with the distant roaring cacophony of battle. “Norwood’s almost here!” Jack said.

“Excellent,” Jelan replied. “If we hold the gatehouse, we’ll keep the drow soldiers from falling back to the castle when Norwood’s forces overwhelm them. We’ll be the anvil to Norwood’s hammer, if we can hold this spot long enough.”

“A sound plan,” Jack agreed. He bowed to the swordswoman. “Give Dresimil Chûmavh and her charming brothers my best if they appear, will you? I am going to rescue Seila.”

The Warlord nodded. “Take Narm or Kurzen with you. I doubt Balathorp will be alone.”

“I’ll go,” Narm said. “Jack has a knack for forgetting to divide treasure, it seems, and Balathorp is a wealthy man.”

The rogue gave Narm a wounded look. “As I said, I incurred additional expenses … but if you wish to assure yourself of my honesty, then suit yourself. Shall we be on our way?”



Skirting through the mushroom-forest and avoiding the road leading up to the castle gate, Jack and Narm headed out into the dark cavern. Jack was struck by how deserted the place seemed. Dresimil Chûmavh must have thrown almost her entire strength into the effort to block Norwood’s invasion, which boded well for Jack’s current mission. Every drow warrior and orc slave who was off fighting on the far side of the cavern was one less they’d have to avoid in their pursuit of the slaver.

“How do we find Balathorp?” Narm asked.

“We’ll begin with the rothé pastures,” Jack said. “They’re east of the castle, I think, and I know there are tracks leading to tunnel mouths in that direction.” How much of a head start did Balathorp have—half an hour? A whole hour? Had he left Chûmavhraele immediately after removing Seila from the drow dungeon, or was he engaged in collecting additional captives to take with him? Jack guessed from what he’d heard of Balathorp’s conversation with his hobgoblins that the slaver wanted to escape with all the merchandise he could find, and that gave Jack hope—slaves in fetters and irons wouldn’t travel fast.

Together the rogue and the swordsman paralleled the track leading from the castle down to the fields. They soon came to Malmor's pastures, which Jack remembered all too well. The supervisor's shack, bunkhouse, and feed-cribs appeared to have been burned down, most likely in the quelling of the slave riots Jack had provoked. No rothé were pastured in the nearer fields, but he could see that a couple of the outlying pastures were filled with the shaggy beasts; evidently the drow had recovered at least some of their herd.

No one was near.

"Well, which way now?" Narm asked.

Jack fought back a surge of sick dread that rose up in him at the idea that he'd missed Balathorp, leaving Seila in the slaver's power. "I don't know," he groaned. "I am afraid that I have no skill for tracking. I was hoping that Balathorp would still be here."

"Should we continue along this trail? It seems to lead toward the cavern wall. Or this other path, here?" Narm compared the two trails. "One of them must be right."

Jack looked at the forking trails. One headed more or less directly toward the cavern wall, while the other cut toward the right between two paddocks and seemed to head for a more distant intersection with the edge of the cavern and the tunnel mouths that would likely be found there. He was just about to guess on the straighter path to the left, but then his eye fell on a very familiar sight—a relatively fresh rothé patty in the middle of the right-hand path. A narrow wagon-wheel sliced right through the fresh dung. He pointed it out to the half-orc. "To the right, friend Narm," he said. "That patty's not an hour old. Make haste!"

He broke into an easy, long-striding lope, staying on the trail as he ran along. Narm matched his pace with some difficulty, because the half-orc was wearing a heavy chain hauberk over thick leather. They went on for several hundred yards, as the glimmering faerie-lights of the tower faded into the gloom of the cave and the sounds of battle from the north grew dim and distant. Jack began to wonder if they'd actually chosen the right path … but then, a short distance ahead of them, they saw a small caravan of rothé pulled

wagons standing along a track winding through towering mushrooms. A handful of hobgoblin and human slavers directed the loading of the carts with chests of treasure and trunks of supplies, while a score of slaves—most of them pretty young women—stood chained to posts at the roadside. It seemed that Fetterfist and his gang were making preparations to move on and did not expect to return, just as he'd thought. Balathorp was nowhere in sight, but Jack caught sight of Seila waiting at one of the posts. She had been stripped to her smallclothes, and sat on the ground with her hands chained above her head. An ugly bruise marked one cheek, but she held her head high, glaring at the slavers.

Jack and Narm ducked off the trail, taking cover amid the giant mushrooms. Narm studied the slaver caravan and scratched at his chin. "I count eight," he said. "Four or five, and I would say that we could charge on in and rely on surprise to see things through. But eight, I am not sure."

"I'd settle for getting Seila free of them," Jack said softly. "We can send word for the authorities to scoop up the rest when they reach the surface. Hmm … what if you created a distraction up by the head of the caravan, draw their attention away from the captives by the posts? I can slip in and cut her loose while the slavers are looking the other way."

"If by distraction you mean attack them all by myself, then I have concerns about your plan," Narm answered. "One on eight sounds even less appealing than two on eight."

Jack handed the half-orc the hand crossbow he was carrying. "Here, try this. Circle around to those rocks over there, and shoot one or two of Balathorp's men. Shout something drowish while you are at it. If they chase after you, retire into the forest here. I'll meet you back by the pastures."

"I don't know any drow expressions."

"Try *caele'ilblith rodhen*," Jack suggested.

"What does it mean?" Narm asked.

"I have no idea, but drow shouted it at me when they were angry. Now go. I will wait until you make your presence known before I move in."

The half-orc took the crossbow in hand and hurried off into the shadows, crouching to keep low. He was surprisingly stealthy when he put his mind to it, Jack noticed; Narm vanished from sight within twenty steps. Jack composed himself to wait, observing the caravan. Balathorp appeared once or twice, issuing instructions to his slavers before heading away to check on some other task. He seemed impatient, and Jack decided that Balathorp was browbeating his minions into hurrying their preparations.

Suddenly there was a cry of alarm from the front of the caravan. One of the hobgoblins staggered back several steps and collapsed, drugged by the poison on the drow quarrels. From somewhere in the gloom Jack head a rather deep and raspy bellow of *"Callie blith rotten! Callie blith rotten!"* which didn't seem terribly convincing to him. On the other hand, another quarrel hissed out of the shadows and knocked down a human slaver. Balathorp's men dove for cover or hefted their own weapons, shouting at each other and pointing toward the darkness.

Jack whispered the words of his invisibility spell, and darted up the road. The shadows were deep and dark beneath the mushrooms; in a few moments he was close behind Seila, crouching in the shadow of a tree-sized fungus.

"Seila, it is I, Jack," Jack whispered.

The young noblewoman started in her chains, and looked back toward Jack. Her eyes opened wide, and she looked left and right, seeking him. "Jack," she whispered back. "I thought the drow were going to kill you."

"I enjoy the most peculiar luck, including enemies who are occasionally quite helpful," he replied. None of the slavers were close by, so he knelt by her and began to work at the lock to her manacles. He had no key, but that was hardly an insuperable challenge; Jack knew from experience that the locks on such devices were necessarily simple, and only needed to be resistant to opening from whoever was wearing them at the time. He started with the point of a dagger, searching for the release mechanism. "Are you hurt? Did that fiend harm you?"

“He stripped me and told me what he would do, but no more,” Seila said, her voice shaking. “I think Balathorp wanted to ransom me back to my father for a fortune, but not before he … before he … oh, I don’t want to speak of it.”

“Say no more. I will have you free in a moment.” Jack bent his efforts toward prying open the lock of the manacles, trying to be as silent as he could.

He opened one lock, and turned to the other—and just at that moment a heavy cudgel whirled through the shadows, striking him across the shoulders. The surprise and impact threw him off his feet, knocking the wind out of him. His invisibility faded as he lost his concentration on maintaining the spell, and he sprawled on the cold hard ground by Seila’s feet. What happened? he wondered, shaking his head in confusion until he realized that someone had thrown a heavy club at him, just barely missing his head.

“Jack, behind you!” Seila cried out, a moment too late.

“Ravenwild,” a familiar voice snarled. “I thought I heard someone playing with Seila’s chains.” Cailek Balathorp stood fifteen feet away beneath the towering mushroom, a sneer of contempt beneath his leather hood. “I had thought the dark elves would see to you, but it looks like I can settle our score personally. What an unexpected pleasure.”

Jack picked himself up, his shoulder aching from the slaver’s club. “Well, I had thought the Watch would see to *you*, but I was mistaken,” he retorted. “More’s the pity.”

Balathorp drew the sword at his hip and grinned wickedly, advancing on Jack. Jack glanced around, looking for some potential advantage or distraction, but nothing leapt to his eye. Several of the slavers were thrashing about the rocks and mushrooms at the head of the caravan, apparently in pursuit of Narm, but others were turning back this way. He took a deep breath, drew the drow rapier he carried, and advanced to meet the slaver. He needed to defeat Balathorp quickly and quietly, before the rest of the slaver’s gang came running.

The slaver lunged forward and aimed a thrust straight at Jack’s belt buckle. Jack parried and riposted; Balathorp’s blade leaped to

meet his own, and the duel was on. Balathorp was tall and had a significant advantage in reach, but Jack was quicker. They were a close match in skill, but Jack faced one crucial problem: Time was not on his side. The shrill song of steel beating against steel already rang in the air, and Jack could hear the shouts of alarm from the rest of the slaver gang. Even if he could wear down Fetterfist and best him in a fair fight, he could never hope to beat five or six at once; he was no Myrkyssa Jelan, after all.

Balathorp recognized Jack's vulnerability, too, and he grinned as he shifted to the defensive, switching to cautious jabs and quick slashes. "You fool," he said to Jack. "Did you think to steal my wares? You will pay with your life … or better yet, you will join your dear Seila in chains."

"Not this day, I think," Jack replied. He took a step back out of sword reach, and invoked his spell of invisibility again—something he was not sure he could do, but the growing swell of the wild mythal's power seemed to invigorate his arcane talents as it increased. Balathorp swore and backed up himself, swinging his sword in a wide arc to fend off any invisible rush Jack mounted. The rogue watched the slaver's sword whip past once, then twice, before jumping inside his reach and sinking his rapier into Balathorp's black heart.

The stricken slaver groaned and staggered. "A base ploy," he gasped.

"For a base foe," Jack snarled. His invisibility spell faded, spoiled by his sudden lunge. He snatched Balathorp's keys from his belt, then kicked the slaver off his swordpoint and hurried back over to Seila. Several of Balathorp's thugs saw the whole thing, taking in the scene with cries of dismay, but Jack coolly bent down to Seila's manacles and opened the lock with the slaver's keys.

"Jack!" Seila called, looking over his shoulder. Running footsteps and roars of challenge grew loud behind him.

"I know," he answered. He grasped her hand and brought to mind his spell of shadow-teleport. An instant before the thugs' blades skewered both of them, Jack and Seila vanished into the cavern gloom.

Hand in hand, Jack and Seila made their way through the gigantic mushrooms of the drow cavern, retracing the path they'd followed in their first escape from Chûmavhraele months before. Behind them Balathorp's slavers vainly scoured their area around the crossroads for any sign of the noblewoman and the rogue, but Jack's spell had carried them two hundred yards or more in the blink of an eye—there was no trail for the slavers to follow, and Jack had no intention of lingering any place their enemies might blunder into them.

"We seem to be making a habit of this," Jack said to Seila as they hurried along. "Remind me to hide a change of clothing and some good food and drink somewhere around here for the next time we find ourselves fleeing the dark elves' domain."

Seila squeezed his hand and shook her head, even though she smiled. "I should have known you would find a way to slip away again."

"I had some timely help. Myrkyssa Jelan set me free; she's down here with a band of sellswords, looking for a way to throw a handful of peppers in Dresimil Chûmavh's bowl of cream. I came straightaway to find you."

"I can't believe that you came back for me a second time, especially after my father treated you with such suspicion."

Jack snorted. "I didn't pluck you away from Balathorp to win Lord Norwood's regard. I simply couldn't live with myself if I left you in the slavers' hands."

He paused to study their direction; Seila tugged on his hand, and when he glanced at her, she flowed into his arms and kissed him with such fierceness that his head swam. "There will be more later," she breathed into his ear when she finally drew away. "That is twice now you have saved me, Jack Ravenwild. I don't care what my father thinks, any man who would do that is a man worthy of my love."

He drew a deep breath to slow the racing of his heart, and allowed himself a wry smile. "We haven't escaped yet," he said.

“Should we make for the platform again?”

“Not this time, my dear. Your father brought a small army down here to deal with the dark elves once and for all. If he isn’t storming Tower Chûmavhraele, he will be soon; I think we’ll be able to find him there.”

They reached Malmor’s paddocks, and Jack motioned for Seila to wait. He peered around in the gloom, looking for any sign of Narm. The half-orc was nowhere in sight; Jack frowned, but told himself that it was possible that he’d been forced to retreat in some inconvenient direction. He was just about to move on again when he finally caught a glimpse of a tall, broad-shouldered figure trotting up along the trail behind them. Narm was limping, and blood ran freely from a shallow cut across his forehead, but he seemed otherwise unharmed.

“Seila, this is Narm,” Jack said. “He is the leader of the Blue Wyvern adventuring company. Narm, this is Seila Norwood.”

“A pleasure,” the half-orc said gruffly. He looked at Jack with a scowl. “Next time, you create the distraction and I’ll sneak up to free the girl.”

“I am sorry you were hurt on my behalf, Master Narm,” Seila said. “I am truly grateful for your help.”

Narm looked down at the ground and gave a small shrug. “It was nothing, m’lady,” he mumbled.

“Let us press on,” Jack suggested. He led the way back toward the tower, listening closely for any sounds of fighting and peering cautiously into the shadows of each mushroom-stalk and boulder they approached—the last thing he wanted to do was to blunder into a battle. The road between pastures and tower seemed deserted for the moment. The black battlements loomed over them, still adorned with their eerie globes of witch-light and faerie fire. Jack could hear fighting within the walls, but no one was in sight atop the ramparts.

Seila paused suddenly at his side, pulling on his hand with hers. “What is that?” she murmured.

Jack glanced back at her, and saw that she was gazing up at the cavern ceiling. A flickering aurora of emerald energy danced in the

high air of the great cavern, organizing itself in great spirals orbiting above a central point some distance away from them. “The wild mythal,” Jack said. “The drow intend to use its magic against your father’s soldiers, I wager.”

“It’s growing stronger.” Seila pointed, and Jack realized that she was right; a visible thread of energy lanced straight up from the cavern floor toward the swirling aurora above them. Moment by moment, the thread seemed to grow a little brighter, a little more substantial, driving back the eternal darkness of the Underdark.

“So it is,” he agreed. That did not seem like a good sign, to say the least. The mythal spell was evolving in front of them, and Jack could feel the subtle currents of its magic shifting and flowing in response. “Come along. I’d like to see what Elana and our mages make of this.”

They came to the castle’s gatehouse. The gates stood open, and whole companies of armsmen from Raven’s Bluff—some in the uniform of the city’s army, others wearing the colors of various noble houses—seemed to be engaged in occupying the castle. There was no sign of Jelan, the Moon Daggers, or the Blue Wyverns, but in the middle of a band of twenty or thirty captains, banner-bearers, and Norwood bodyguards stood Marden Norwood himself. The silver-haired lord stood just outside the courtyard, watching as the captains of the city’s assault force directed the taking of Tower Chûmavhraele. Jack could see human, dwarf, and elf soldiers storming the doorways and halls of the drow castle; shouts and the clatter of steel rang from the depths of the fortress.

“Father!” cried Seila. She ran up to embrace the old lord. “How did you get here?”

“Seila, my lass!” Norwood swept Seila into his arms and hugged her close. “I feared that something terrible had happened to you!”

“It almost did,” Seila answered. “Balathorp tried to spirit me away before your army arrived, but Jack here—and his friend, Narm—tracked him down and rescued me.”

Norwood’s eyebrows rose. He looked at Jack, and after a long moment gave him a grudging nod of respect. “Well done, Jack. I am once again in your debt.”

Jack nodded back. There was no particular reason to mention the Sarkonagael business if it had momentarily slipped Norwood's mind, he decided. "What happened here?" he asked. "We left Elana and her company at the gatehouse when we set out after Balathorp."

"We broke the drow lines when we finally pushed them out of the tunnel and into the open cavern," Norwood replied. "They fell back on the castle, but Elana and her warriors held the gate open just long enough for my soldiers to storm the place on the heels of the remaining dark elves. We have them, I think."

"You must have half the army here," said Seila.

"Six companies of it," the old lord replied. "That was the most I could persuade the Noble Council to release, given the possibility that there might be other enemies like Balathorp ready to move if we stripped our defenses. However, I also have armsmen of six or seven noble houses here, too. It's time to put an end to this." He glanced at the soldiers securing the castle. "I am sorry that it took us so long. It took a couple of hours to gather the troops, and it was a half-day's march through the tunnels to find our way to this cavern."

"Where are Elana and the others?" Jack asked.

"They pursued a small party of dark elves who escaped the castle when our assault began." Norwood pointed toward the flickering green column of eldritch energy. "The drow fled into the old ruined city, and that started up soon afterward. Do you know what it is?"

"The wild mythal of their ancient city," Jack replied. "I think Dresimil means to turn its power against you. Send all of the soldiers you can spare—we can't let her have it to herself." Jack clapped Narm on his arm. "Come, friend Narm, and let's see if we can find our companions again. They might have need of us."

The half-orc shrugged. "As long as you realize that someone must pay for all this."

"Wait," said Seila. "I am coming, as well."

"Absolutely not," Norwood said. "Seila, stay with me. You will be safer with our soldiers around you."

"Please, do as your father says," Jack said. "I will feel better knowing that you are as safe as you can be in this place."

Seila bridled and started to protest, but reluctantly she nodded. “Very well. But be careful yourself, Jack.”

Norwood clasped Jack’s hand firmly, and then Jack and Narm hurried back out of the castle. They turned right, and Jack led the way as they struck out across the cavern floor, making their way in a roundabout direction toward the excavations by the lakeshore. Jack led the way with more haste than caution; Dresimil’s warriors were busy, and he thought that patrols in Chûmavhraele’s cavern were likely to be few and far between at the moment. In a quarter-hour, the faint outlines of the rambling walls and mud-filled towers of the long-drowned drow city loomed ahead in the gloom. No slaves were at work in the ruins; Jack guessed that the dark elves had most of the workers locked in their pens while so many of their soldiers were busy fighting elsewhere. They slowed their pace and quietly groped their way through the maze of muddy streets and crumbling buildings.

Even without the flickering shaft of emerald light to guide them, Jack could have picked out the wild mythal’s bearing and set a straight course for the stone. He trotted as swiftly as he dared through the ancient streets, Narm at his side. They passed through the broken archway of an old city gate, crossed a square of fluted columns arranged in different heights and numbers, and came to a broad boulevard leading straight toward the plaza at the heart of the city. In silence they stole forward, until Jack spied the ruined shell of a palace or temple that would let them reach the plaza unobserved. He slipped inside through a gloomy doorway and made his way closer until he could peer through a hole in the outer wall at the old mythal.

Dozens of drow soldiers stood guard around the plaza, protecting Jaeren and Jezzryd Chûmavh as they chanted and wove their arms before the mythal stone, seeming to shape and conduct the blazing font of magical power in front of them. Dresimil stood a short distance behind her brothers, observing the proceedings.

“To the right,” Narm said in a low voice. He nodded at the shell of a building across the street; there, Jack glimpsed Jelan, Kilarnan, Kurzen, Wulfrad, and Halamar likewise sheltering out of sight of

the dark elves guarding the plaza. Crossing directly over to the other building would entail darting across a street with nothing to conceal them … but Jack had no intention of letting the drow know he was nearby.

"Hold still," he whispered, and took Narm by the arm. With a small invocation he worked his spell of shadow-teleporting, and whisked the two of them to the same building sheltering the others. In the blink of an eye they stood beside Jelan and the mercenaries.

Jelan, Kurzen, and the rest swore and leaped back, raising weapons and beginning spells before they recognized Jack and Narm. "Moradin's beard, Jack," Kurzen snarled. "I was ready to split your skull! A word of warning next time, if you value your life."

"My apologies," Jack said. "It seemed safer than trying to sneak up on you."

"What are the drow mages doing?" Narm asked, watching the dark elves through the ruined wall.

Jack peered through the gap, trying to sense the fluctuations in the mythal's magic. After a moment he said, "They are altering its enchantments. I have the sense that Jezzryd is preparing a barrier of some sort, while Jaeren is concentrating destructive energy."

"Nothing that we should permit them to finish, then," Jelan said.

Kilarnan looked at Jack in surprise. "You can discern the spells they are shaping?" he asked.

"I have a connection with the mythal. It's the source of the magic I was born with."

"What could they do with the mythal's powers?" Arlith asked.

Jack shrugged. "I am afraid I have little insight to offer. The device has been inert for most of my life, and I have no idea what it is capable of."

Kilarnan frowned. "Mythals create magical effects in a wide area. A barrier might take the form of a wall of energy that physically blocks enemies from entering or a mystic obstacle that impedes hostile magic. The destructive energy of the mythal might be capable of smiting every non-drow in this cavern with a bolt of arcane lightning, or razing Raven's Bluff to the ground with a storm

of fire, or opening up a gate to the Abyss for demons to pour into our world. There is almost nothing that they could not do."

Jack grimaced; those were unappealing notions, to say the least. "As Elana said, nothing we should permit them to finish."

"We are somewhat outnumbered," Halamar pointed out.

"We have the advantage of surprise," Jelan said. The swordswoman studied the plaza for a moment, and nodded to herself. "Halamar and Kilarnan, employ your spells on the drow warriors. Do what you can to scatter and confuse them. I will deal with Dresimil. Jack, the mythal is your task. You and the Blue Wyverns must stop the sorcerers. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Jack. Narm, Kurzen, and the rest followed with brief nods or "ayes."

The Warlord looked to Kilarnan and Halamar. "Spells first," she said. "Strike together when you are ready."

The mages briefly conferred, then began summoning their magic. Jack poised himself to make a sprint for the mythal stone as the rest of the party readied their weapons. Then Kilarnan unleashed a spell of chained lightning at the drow warriors standing on one side of the plaza, while Halamar conjured a huge ball of fire that burst in a great explosion on the other side. Dozens of drow fell beneath the leaping blue arcs of lightning cascading from one warrior to the next or shrieked and flailed in the roaring flames of Halamar's spell. Instantly Jelan leaped out of hiding and led the way as she charged across the plaza, roaring a battle cry; Monagh and Wulfrad followed only a step behind her, throwing themselves against their foes. Even as the adventurers hammered into the battered ranks of the dark elves, Kilarnan and Halamar were working new spells, while drow mages retaliated with bolts of ice and blasts of lightning back at the adventurers.

Jack waited a few moments to get a sense of how the fighting might shape up, then drew the drowish rapier at his belt and darted out into the plaza with Narm, Kurzen, and Arlith close behind him. Narm and Arlith were swept up into the furious melee, peeling away to meet drow warriors moving to intercept them, but Jack and Kurzen dodged through the press and reached the mythal stone.

Jack pointed Kurzen at Jaeren and turned on Jezzryd. “Cut them down!” he cried.

The sorcerers glanced at Jack and went back to their work. Jack simply stepped forward and thrust his rapier straight at Jezzryd’s heart—but an inch before the steel point pierced the sorcerer’s robes, a green field flashed into visibility around Jezzryd’s body, stopping the point as surely as if Jack had stabbed a stone wall. An electric jolt like a buzzing of angry wasps ran up the hilt and through Jack’s arm, so sharp and intense that he dropped his blade with a cry of pain. Ten feet away, Kurzen fared no better—the warhammer he leveled at Jaeren’s skull rebounded with such force that he staggered and fell, swearing.

“Your efforts are futile, Lord Wildhame,” Jezzryd remarked. “But you may continue them if you wish.”

Kurzen picked himself up and tried to bodily tackle Jaeren, but he rebounded as before. “Damn it all,” he growled. “Jack, what do we do?”

Jack stared, helpless. He could feel the mounting power of the mythal. The sorcerers could scour all life from the plaza with a mere thought if they decided to. In pure desperation he shouted, “Guard me!” and stepped forward to brush his fingertips against the mythal stone, reaching out with his arcane senses and opening himself to the intangible flow of mystic energies that seethed around the wild mythal.

The torrent was powerful enough to stagger him where he stood, but he kept his feet and fixed his mind on sending the device into dormancy again. To his amazement the raging column of magic visibly dimmed and weakened … but then Jaeren and Jezzryd, standing on the opposite sides of the stone, detected his interference and redoubled their own efforts to feed the stone’s churning power. “You have outlived your usefulness, Ravenwild!” Jaeren snarled. “Continue this interference at peril of your life!”

“I believe I will take my chances,” Jack replied. He tried to shape a force-missile spell to blast the drow sorcerer, but the instant he diverted his attention from the struggle for control of the mythal’s power Jaeren shaped the torrent into a blazing emerald flame that

nearly incinerated him on the spot. Only a desperate mental lunge for the unseen strands of power saved Jack; he retaliated with the same attack, but Jezzryd interposed an impenetrable barrier, protecting his brother. The mythal's power was a knife, lethal and beautiful, poised directly between them—and like three warriors struggling over a single blade, whichever one of them lost his focus or will first would die.

In the corner of his eye Jack observed the battle raging around the mythal plaza. A drow warrior ran through the tattooed fighter Monagh from behind, slaying him as he battled two other dark elves. The guard-sergeant Sinafae leveled her crossbow at Jack, but Kurzen barreled into the dark elf and knocked her down. Sinafae slashed Kurzen across the midsection with the short sword in her other hand, but the dwarf's armor held, and he smashed her shoulder and breastbone with his hammer. Narm tore into drow warriors with a berserker's fury, leaping and darting like a cornered tiger.

In the center of the plaza, Myrkyssa Jelan faced Dresimil Chûmavh. "I have seen that no spell can harm you," Dresimil snarled at the Warlord, "but Lolth strengthens my hand, human. Let us see whether you are immune to my mace." An aura of pale white fire seemed to surround the drow marquise, empowering her with the Spider Queen's blessing; the silver scepter in her hands flew and struck like a switch of willow, but each blow shattered flagstones or pulverized blocks in the walls. It was all Jelan could do to avoid Dresimil's attacks.

Jaeren and Jezzryd's grasp on the wild mythal grew ever stronger, and Jack felt his hold beginning to slip. Jezzryd shielded his brother, guarding for both of them, while Jaeren bent his full attention to Jack's destruction. One opponent Jack might have been able to stand against; after all, it was *his* mythal. But two working together were rapidly overwhelming him.

"Excellent, my brother!" Jaeren shouted within the coruscating sheets of raw magic. "Feed me more strength, so that I may finish this impudent human!" Jezzryd heard his twin and responded,

pouring his strength into the mythal. Jack's knees buckled and he sagged to the floor, fighting for nothing more than sheer survival.

Behind him, Dresimil cornered Myrkyssa. "And you were supposed to be impossible to defeat," she laughed, and drew back for one blow of overwhelming strength. The silver mace rose high into the air, and then came down—but instead of attempting to parry the blow that could not be stopped, Jelan dropped her katana, reached up with her hands to seize Dresimil's hands on the grip of the mace, and allowed herself to fall under the blow. With all her strength she *pulled* down on the mace, adding her strength to Dresimil's Lolth-granted might, and allowed the drow noblewoman to overbalance. Dresimil struck the cold flagstones face-first, landing on her head and shoulders as she flipped over Jelan. Dresimil struggled to right herself, but Jelan was quicker. She seized the katana on the floor beside her, gripped it at hilt and mid-blade, and punched ten inches of its chisel-like point through the mail covering Dresimil's chest.

Myrkyssa Jelan rolled to her feet and stood. "And you supposed that magic made you invulnerable," she said. "Give your dark goddess my regards." She looked for another foe, just as one of Dresimil's bodyguards nearly killed her with a sword-slash across the ribs. Jelan cried out and staggered back, a hand clapped across her wound, but before the dark elf could finish her, a small crossbow quarrel appeared in his left cheek, and he sagged to the ground unconscious. Arlith bared her teeth in a fierce grin from her place at the edge of the plaza and drew back her string for another shot.

Emerald fire crackled around Jack, mere inches from consuming him. He felt his strength beginning to give out … but Myrkyssa's ploy suggested a desperate gambit. Rather than directly resisting Jaeren's power, he abruptly shifted the nature of his defense, throwing his effort into deflecting Jaeren's attack toward the mythal itself and recklessly drawing as much power as he could to aid the effort. The mythal's magic was caught, absorbed, and magnified to be returned an instant later. With each heartbeat the magical conflagration doubled and redoubled in strength.

Jaeren sensed the danger. “You fool, stop!” he shouted at Jack. “You will destroy us all!” He tried to arrest the mythal’s power and regain control of its energy, but Jezzryd was slower to perceive the danger and worked to shield his brother with ever more determination. Now Jack and Jezzryd worked together to stoke the fires of the mythal, while Jaeren frantically tried to rein in the mounting power. Before Jack the mythal stone grew completely transparent, the stone only a hint of dark glass encasing a blazing emerald fire that was too bright to look at. Bolts of green incandescence escaped from the blaze, lancing randomly across the plaza to pulverize ancient ruins or strike down unlucky warriors. Drow and surface adventurers alike retreated from the fierce blaze. Half-blinded by the day-like brilliance and fighting without the leadership of Dresimil, the dark elves wavered and began to break.

The others standing near felt the mythal’s strain, too. Halamar turned a stricken look on the rogue and shouted, “Flee, Jack! It’s going to shatter!” But Jack hardly heard him; his blood sang with the mythal’s unquenchable fire, and for one dizzy instant he teetered on the brink of the precipice. Then, suddenly, he felt the crumbling of the last wards and checks designed long ago to preserve the mighty device from being consumed by the magic it controlled. He released his grasp on the mythal and staggered back; Jaeren and Jezzryd could not spare even the eyeblink of attention it would take to destroy him, as the drow sorcerers tried to bring under control something that had slipped all bounds of mortal magic.

Shimmering cracks appeared in the mythal stone, and everyone still fighting in the plaza, drow and non-drow alike, abandoned their duels to distance themselves from the incipient disaster. Jack staggered away, suddenly exhausted beyond all measure. He had no idea what would happen when the mythal failed, but whatever it was, there could surely be no harm in being as far from the stone as possible. He decided on a sturdy old wall that looked like it might offer some shelter … but then he found his feet rooted to the ground. He looked back in horror, and saw Dresimil Chûmavh—lying on the ground, blood bubbling from her lips—holding a fist

clenched in front of her, her eyes fixed on him. “Not so fast, Jack,” she rasped. “You can die where you stand, or you can help my brothers contain the mythal.”

Jack strained to escape the spell of holding, but it was useless—he was unable to take another step. He glanced once more at the mythal, now turning black with the virulence of its power, and averted his face. Just then, Myrkyssa Jelan ran back onto the plaza, and moved to shield him from the mythal with her body. “You are insane!” he shouted against the howling of the unrestrained magic.

“On the contrary, I have confidence in my curse,” she replied. The mythal gave one final tortured blast of energy toward the cavern ceiling, and Jelan suddenly hugged Jack as tightly as she could, shielding him. Then the mythal exploded. Wild magic lashed and flailed the ancient ruins, shattering buildings and bringing huge falls of rock and dust from the cavern ceiling far overhead. Jack *felt* the mythal’s end as if someone had reached into the very core of his being and severed some taut cord with a sharp knife. Jaeren and Jezzryd, standing only ten feet away, simply disintegrated in the wash of arcane power. Dresimil was blasted into an unyielding stone wall with enough force to break every bone in her dying body; drow and adventurers a hundred yards away were thrown from their feet. But the raving emerald streams passed around Myrkyssa Jelan … and Jack as well, guarded by her antimagic.

Echoes of thunder rolled through the cavern as blackness descended once more. Jack blinked away bright green after-images that dotted his vision and found his feet free to move. He pulled away from Jelan with a simple nod of thanks, and then looked around the plaza. Slowly, his surviving comrades were standing up and checking themselves for injury. Halamar and Kurzen appeared unharmed; Narm lay unconscious, apparently knocked out by a chunk of flying masonry, and the priest Wulfrad had been crushed under a cart-sized stalactite that lay broken around his body.

“Jack! Jack!” The rogue looked up and saw Seila and her father hurrying down the avenue leading to the plaza, columns of armsmen flanking them on each side. “Are you hurt?”

“Seila?” Jack called. He picked his way through the wreckage, and then ran over to catch her in his arms.

Jelan stood staring at the wreckage of the wild mythal. She held up her hand and, with a small frown of concentration, evoked a small green flame from her fingertip. “Remarkable,” she breathed. “I can *feel* the substance of magic. I can feel it!”

“Is that it, then?” Norwood wondered aloud. “Are they truly beaten?”

Jack looked around for more dark elves, anticipating that they might be regrouping in the shadows—but there were no conscious drow in sight. He’d seen Jaeren, Jezzryd, and Dresimil killed outright, and even if some cousin or another survived to claim leadership of House Chûmavh, most of their warriors and slave monsters had been wiped out in Norwood’s assault. Fetterfist, Cailek Balathorp, was dead under Jack’s own blade … but there were certainly any number of slaves to rescue.

A small, wiry figure groaned and stirred quite close to the mythal’s resting place, then slowly pushed himself to his feet. Jack frowned, wondering who it was … and found himself staring at his own visage, although somewhat burned and disheveled from the force of the explosion. The shadow-double met Jack’s eyes, smirking in silence, and then darted off into the smoke and gloom of the ruined city. Jack took two quick steps and seized a drow crossbow to bring down the creature before he got away, but it was too late—by the time he had the weapon in hand, the simulacrum was nowhere in sight.

“What was that, Jack?” Seila asked.

“No one of consequence,” Jack said slowly. Apparently the simulacrum was disheveled enough that Seila hadn’t noticed the resemblance. Tarandor must have indeed found his way down to Chûmavhraele and interred his double in the wild mythal sometime in the last few days before the attack on Blackwood Manor and Norwood’s attack. He wondered if the abjurer would discover that the imprisoned Jack was now free, and decided it didn’t matter. Whatever Tarandor feared, the ancient mythal stone was a smoking heap of rubble, and even Jack, dabbler and dilettante that he was,

could see that there was no magic that could ever make it whole again.

Halamar and Kurzen limped up, joined a moment later by Jelan. “Well, I expect that bounced every wizard within a thousand miles out of his bed,” Halamar remarked. “Did you have to destroy the thing, Jack? Great magics like that are rare wonders indeed, you know.”

“It was that, or let the drow have it for their own. I don’t want to think about what Dresimil and her brothers would have done with the wild mythal; it was too powerful a weapon to leave in anyone’s hands,” Jack answered. “In fact, Mystra herself told me as much once upon a time. I only hope there is not too great an area of dead magic left behind. Raven’s Bluff without magic would be little fun.”

Halamar frowned. “Dead magic? The arcane currents flow unconstrained, Jack.”

Jack blinked. “I do not sense them,” he said. He glanced at Jelan, and a sudden suspicion came to him. His magic was born of the wild mythal, in its way. Had he just deprived himself of his own sorcery? Or had Myrkyssa Jelan’s curse been transferred to him when the overwhelming power of the mythal’s destruction had washed over them both? He tried a minor cantrip, summoning up a light spell … but absolutely nothing happened. Quickly he tried several more spells; he might as well have been making up nonsense. “My magic’s gone,” he groaned.

Myrkyssa Jelan bowed her head. “If I caused it, Jack, then I am sincerely sorry; I only meant to see you spared if I could manage it.” Then she looked up with a wry smile. “And yet irony is again served; you once deprived me of my magic, and now perhaps I have deprived you of yours. However, look at it like this: You may find there are certain advantages to learning to rely on wits, character, and hard work alone.”

Jack made a small strangled sound in his throat. “What a horrible thing to say.”

Seila came to Jack’s side and slipped her arm around his waist again, quietly comforting him. She looked around the ruined plaza

and gave a small shake of her head. “It seems that we are done here,” she said. “What do we do now?”

“Now?” Jack answered. He stood silent for a moment, wondering whether his magic was indeed gone forever or merely dormant for a time, and then shook off his self-pity with a low laugh. He stepped back to kiss her hand, rendering a florid bow. “Now, my dear, we go home, enjoy a flagon of the best wine gold can buy, and celebrate! I, for one, am through with the Underdark, the drow, and all their works.”

Seila laughed, and kissed Jack until his heart thundered in his chest; and he was consoled by the thought that there was more than one sort of magic in the world.

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